



Christian Conference of Asia



# **CCA Webinar Series on the COVID-19 Crisis: Emerging Issues and Concerns in Asia**

**Plight of Migrant Workers amidst the COVID-19 Crisis**

**Churches in Asia Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis**

**Right to Health amidst the COVID-19 Crisis**

**Upholding the Dignity and Rights of  
Children amidst the COVID-19 Crisis**

**Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Women in Asia:**

**Vital Needs and Post-Crisis Recovery**

**Will COVID-19 Worsen Food Insecurity in Asia?**

**Towards Wider Partnerships for Combatting Trafficking in**

**Women and Girls amidst COVID-19**

**Impact of Growing Religious Extremism on Women in Asia**



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Reports prepared by: Ruth Mathen

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Christian Conference of Asia

Payap University Campus

Mueang, Chiang Mai 50000

Thailand

Tel: +66-53-243-906; 243-907

Email: [cca@cca.org.hk](mailto:cca@cca.org.hk)

Website: [www.cca.org.hk](http://www.cca.org.hk)

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# Introduction

The spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, resulted in its escalation to a full-blown pandemic that took its toll on various fronts—from claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of people to hampering welfare and devastating economies around the world. As the COVID-19 pandemic swept through all countries, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) affirmed its ongoing commitment and attempted to engage a number of the CCA's member churches and councils, related organisations, other faith communities, non-governmental and inter-governmental organisations including the United Nations (UN), to respond to the crisis.

The CCA organised a series of virtual seminars (webinars) as part of these very initiatives to evolve ecumenical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Between April and October 2020, the CCA organised and facilitated seven webinars which focused on emerging issues and key concerns amidst the COVID-19 crisis from Asian perspectives.

The webinar series covered a wide range of issues related to the COVID-19 crisis, beginning with the plight of migrant workers, followed by the response of churches during the COVID-19 crisis, the right to health amidst the pandemic, the preservation of the rights and dignity of children and women amidst the crisis, the prospects of food insecurity, and the human trafficking situation in Asia.

The main objective of the CCA's webinars was to serve as a forum to share emerging challenges and develop insights and solutions together. Each webinar was attended by several registered participants and the online views on the CCA's social media pages averaged 3,000 hits per session. The analyses and views shared by the esteemed panels of experts during each webinar session offered valuable insights. The common denominator to all the perspectives shared was that amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the most critical need was to unify efforts and learn from the best

practices and work of each other to strengthen collaborations, accompaniment, and solidarity in various ways in the coming days.

It was heartening to note that the discernments and good practices shared during the webinars were significant and worth emulating in response to the crisis, instilling hope amidst anguish and anxiety. Hope is not a mere wish or flimsy notion for temporary consolation, but is the driving force in our lives, based on our faith and trust in God's abundant mercies and blessings for all God's people. Inspiring us to believe and know that current circumstances will be ameliorated, hope plays a potent role in these emerging adversities. Instilling hope in the hearts and minds of those who despair and envisioning the path towards a better future empowers action to overcome tough times and ensures improved well-being, meaning, and purpose in our lives. Although the emerging trends and situations related to each theme was discussed, each session concluded on a note of positivity and hope amidst apprehension and crisis. Our prayer and hope at all times should be striving for a better and improved future.

**Mathews George Chunakara**

*General Secretary, CCA*

## Viewership Statistics

No.	Webinar	Date	Zoom Participants	Social Media Hits
1.	The Plight of Migrant Workers amidst the COVID-19 Crisis	30 April 2020	100	3,100
2.	Churches in Asia Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis	7 May 2020	100	5,400
3.	Right to Health amidst the COVID-19 Crisis	14 May 2020	56	2,100
4.	Upholding the Dignity and Rights of Children amidst the COVID-19 Crisis	19 May 2020	47	2,600
5.	Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Women in Asia: Vital Needs and Post-Crisis Recovery	21 May 2020	80	3,200
6.	Will COVID-19 Worsen Food Insecurity in Asia?	28 May 2020	60	1,800
7.	Towards Wider Partnerships for Combatting Trafficking in Women and Girls amidst COVID-19	1 October 2020	50	1,600
8.	Impact of Growing Religious Extremism on Women in Asia	15 December 2020	55	1000



Christian Conference of Asia



## Virtual Conference 'Churches in Asia Responding to COVID-19 Crisis'

Thursday, 7 May 2020 | 12:00 to 14:00 (Bangkok Time)



Bishop Dr Yakob Mar Irenaios  
India



Ephorus Dr Willem Simarmata Dr Mathews George Chunakara  
CCA Moderator



Bishop Sebouh Sarkisian  
Iran



Fr. William LaRousse  
FABC/Hong Kong



Bishop Reuel Marigza  
Philippines



Dr Sawako Fujiwara  
Japan



Bishop Leo Paul  
Pakistan



Rev. Jacky Manuputty  
Indonesia

# **The Plight of Migrant Workers amidst the COVID-19 Crisis**

*30 April 2020*

## **Background and Context**

The rapid proliferation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing loss of life and livelihood has caused an unprecedented socioeconomic crisis, exposing the structural inefficiencies of the global economy and causing mass displacement of workers around the world— the worst-hit of whom are migrant workers. Whether international migrants or internal migrants, migrant workers have been disproportionately affected given their inadequate and crowded living conditions, limited access to healthcare and basic services, and exploitative labour systems.

Two types of institutional responses to the spread of the pandemic are seen in Asia: the first is a total shutdown (such as the national lockdown in India and the curfew in Sri Lanka), and the second is a partial shutdown (as seen in Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Thailand), where certain work areas are functional even as there are restrictions on public gatherings. The variability in institutional responses is caused by the nature of the country's industries and legitimate fear that a total economic shutdown could result in a collapse of the domestic economy. This distinction in state responses has differential impacts across countries as well as regions, generating country-specific issues when it comes to the plight of workers in supply chains.

In the Arabian Gulf states, foreign migrant workers have been retrenched and several have lost their jobs overnight. The migrant labour workforces who have long suffered precarious living conditions are now pushed to the brink of extreme vulnerability. Many have been put on unpaid leave with only food and accommodation monetarily covered. Even as governments

and authorities attempt to limit the damage, workers in some labour camps are forced to live with infected/quarantined people, against the World Health Organisation's (WHO) recommendations of physical distancing and isolation. Those employed in cleaning and construction jobs are at a higher risk of contracting the virus given that they may already suffer underlying respiratory health problems due to their exposure to dust, pollution, and heat stress.

The pandemic has exposed the wider socioeconomic divide that documented and undocumented labourers suffer. Staying at home is a privilege many cannot afford. Over half a million blue-collar domestic migrant workers made the arduous journey on foot to their homes in India on the eve of the national lockdown. Thailand hosts more than four million migrant workers, many of whom instantly became jobless and defied travel and mobility restrictions, rushing to return to their home provinces in Thailand, or their homelands in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. As economic activity ground to a halt, migrant workers have no means of sustenance.

While the experiences of migrant workers differ contextually, common to all domestic and foreign migrant workers are the following problems: loss of means of livelihood, minimal provisions of food and other necessities during the lockdown, exclusion from welfare eligibility, invisibility, the vulnerability of their sectors in the economy, and deepening of social inequality.

The webinar aimed to provide a forum in which representatives of the CCA's member churches and councils could provide an overview of the current situation of internal and foreign migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in their communities in Asia and the Arabian Gulf states; to obtain first-hand information about the situation of the migrant workers in different Asian countries— sending, receiving, and transit countries; to hear

from churches, faith-based groups, and civil society organisations which are working to address the challenges related to the spread of COVID-19 and the increasing level of insecurity and risks for migrant workers; and to sensitise participants about the conditions, problems, and needs of Asian migrant workers, and express solidarity with them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Panellists***

#### ***Moderator***

- **Dr Mathews George Chunakara,**  
*General Secretary, CCA*
- **Dr Sebastian Irudaya Rajan**  
*Professor at Centre for Development Studies (India)*
- **Dolores Balladares-Pelaez**  
*Chairperson of UNIFIL-MIGRANTE (Philippines)*
- **Helen Monisha Sarkar**  
*National General Secretary of YWCA (Bangladesh)*
- **Soman Baby**  
*Senior journalist in the Arabian Gulf (Bahrain)*
- **Yusmiati Vistamika Wangka**  
*Centre for Migrant Domestic Workers (Hong Kong)*
- **Rev. Changweon Jang**  
*Osan Migrant Workers Centre (South Korea)*
- **Solomon David**  
*Consultant, Aviation and Airline industry (United Arab Emirates)*
- **Brahm Press**  
*Executive Director, Migrant Assistance Programme  
Foundation (Thailand)*



## Webinar Report

The panellists of the webinar observed that migrant workers bore the brunt of the COVID-19 crisis and its growing impacts.

“Among the most vulnerable in the wake of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Asia and the Arabian Gulf are migrant workers – especially those who are semi-skilled workers, those employed in domestic work, and those in labour camps. Internal migrant workers and overseas workers across Asia are among the many who are bearing the worst brunt of the pandemic’s consequences,” analysed the panellists of the webinar. They asserted that migrant workers bore the brunt of the COVID-19 crisis and its growing impacts.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, CCA General Secretary, who moderated and introduced the topic of the virtual conference, said that despite the term ‘migrant workers’ bearing varied connotations in different contexts, the discussions were to focus on the plight of all migrant workers, whether they were international migrant workers, internal labour migrant workers, or guest workers within a country or beyond its borders.

The presentations and discussions led by eight panellists from diverse backgrounds in Asia including the West Asian Arabian Gulf countries highlighted the plight of the migrant workers. They addressed the pressing concerns of migrant workers including the ‘internal labour’ migrant workers within a country, casual and unskilled workers who have migrated overseas, those offering their services on a temporary or seasonal basis, or those working as domestic workers or industrial workers in different Asian and Arabian Gulf countries.

Dr Sebastian Irudaya Rajan, a professor from the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Kerala, India, spoke of how the COVID-19 pandemic became an opportunity for reconsidering the long-term institutional negligence of migrant workers around the world. Speaking of the twenty million Indians who were overseas migrant workers, he said that the issues of overcrowded labour camps, unpaid salaries, and cheating by employers were not unique and had worsened the conditions of such workers since the outbreak of COVID-19.

Dr Irudaya Rajan, an expert with decades of experience in the field of labour migration issues, also shared the situation of the internal migrant workers within India who were stranded, cut off from public transportation for travel back to their homes, and forced to travel hundreds of kilometres, mostly on foot, without proper or timely assistance from the state after the sudden announcement of a national lockdown by the Indian government. He iterated the need for the government to step up its efforts to provide to such labourers accommodation facilities where physical distancing was possible, so as to contain the spread of the virus amongst them.

Dolores Balladares-Pelaez, Chairperson of UNIFIL-MIGRANTE in the Philippines, illustrated how migrant workers from the Philippines had been abandoned by their own government and described their condition as ‘volatile, insecure, and vulnerable’. The lockdown had rendered several thousand workers without jobs or pay. The insecurity of overseas Filipino migrant workers was compounded by the lack, and in some cases, the total absence of Filipino government services to aid them. Although the Filipino government rolled out a temporary relief assistance programme, it was insufficient and catered only to 150,000 migrant workers.

Ms Balladares-Pelaez also highlighted that many migrant workers stranded abroad were under threat of becoming undocumented. Filipino migrant workers stranded abroad, most of whom were on temporary work visas or technical training visas, were not eligible for any relief programmes. They were also unable to get their visas renewed, she stated.

Brahm Press, the Executive Director of the Migrant Assistance Programme (MAP Foundation) in Thailand, highlighted the characteristics of Thailand as a receiving country— the migrant population in Thailand was diverse, with the overseas labour force comprising mainly Burmese, Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese citizens. He described the situation of such migrant workers in Thailand as going from bad to worse, describing the ‘mass exodus’ of around 60,000 migrant workers after the national lockdown was announced.

Though the national government was providing financial assistance to employers, the benefit was not trickling down to

the migrant workers, stated Mr Press. Employers were using the government's financial assistance as recompense for their own loss of income. The workers in agricultural plantations were those in most need of relief and aid at this stage. The biggest concern was the immediate survival of such workers who did not have or could not rely upon savings, and he observed that many workers were heading into debt solely because they were borrowing to purchase food. Migrants in detention, he said, were also among the most vulnerable groups of people in the country.

Yusmiati Vistamika Wangka, from the Christian Action Centre for Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong, shared the vulnerabilities of the domestic household workers in Hong Kong, of which over 98 per cent were women. The social unrest combined with social distancing had led to a lack of 'decent work' for domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong. Sharing results from a survey conducted among 150 Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong, Ms Wangka explained that a large percentage reported higher workloads in terms of household work without any regulation on working hours, despite the pandemic. Redress was extremely limited given that labour tribunals and courts in Hong Kong had suspended functioning until further notice.

Ms Wangka further shared the responses and experiences of Indonesian and Filipino churches in Hong Kong and said the immediate concern of churches was to ensure the well-being of their own congregations. Centres had been opened to cater to the accommodation and health needs of migrant working populations; faith communities had also been instrumental in offering counselling services and disseminating information about the pandemic in the migrant workers' native languages.

Rev. Changweon Jang from the Osan Migrant Workers Centre in Seoul, South Korea, shared the experiences from local situations in the country. The 'twin principles of promptness and transparency' had been most effective in ensuring disease control and prevention and were the two pillars of the South Korean response to the virus.

According to Rev. Jang, migrant workers in Korea were permitted to access testing for free. However, on the flip side, they were subject to discrimination and were seen as the 'problem' who brought the virus to the country. He also said that South Korean

churches had partnered with civil society organisations to jointly alleviate the situation of defenceless migrant workers in the country.

Focusing on the situation of migrant workers in the Arabian Gulf states, Soman Baby, a senior journalist based in Bahrain who covered the Arabian Gulf states for different media over the decades, shared the plight of the migrant workers in various Gulf states since the outbreak of COVID-19. 85 per cent of the workforce in the Gulf were typically poor labourers and they also formed the bulk of those labourers who were stranded.

Mr Baby brought attention to the work of the Bahrain government for migrant workers, as well as the assistance provided by local social organisations in the country. The government had announced a large fiscal stimulus package. With numerous relief funds being set up and with the government waiving off utility bills of all citizens, help had reached the most vulnerable people in the country at this difficult time. Social organisations had also stepped in to provide food and health kits to those in labour camps.

Solomon David, an airline and aviation consultant who has been working with networks of migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates, spoke of the worrying concern of social distancing within the thickly-populated labour camps of construction companies, wherein rooms with limited facilities were shared among six to eight, or sometimes even more workers. Although the government attempted to provide general solutions such as discounts and vouchers, the relief provided was not effective for the majority of blue-collar workers who were less privileged in terms of salary, social security, and health care.

Mr David shared the positive examples of the work of different Asian diasporic churches of CCA member constituencies based in the region who provided food in labour camps. He also said that the Roman Catholic Church congregations had started community kitchens with government help, and were catering to almost 7,000 migrant workers in the labour camps.

Helen Monisha Sarkar, the National General Secretary of YWCA Bangladesh, highlighted the plight of 50 million internal migrant workers within Bangladesh, such as day labourers, rickshaw

pullers, roadside vendors, and small-scale business owners. As the lockdown continued in the country, most of those internal migrant workers lived in hand-to-mouth subsistence situations, and thus she predicted that the biggest crisis Bangladesh would have to grapple in the coming days is starvation.

Ms Sarkar also spoke of the 4.5 million workers in the textile and readymade garment industry in Bangladesh, of which 50 per cent are women who had internally migrated from rural areas and were working in cities or big towns. As many of them were single women living alone in large cities, they were at greater risks of suffering gender-based violence and abuse.

Bishop Philip Huggins, president of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), a participant of the virtual conference opined, “The discussions in this webinar indicate that, for many years ahead, the highest quality of cooperation will be needed amongst CCA members, if we are to help vulnerable people live with dignity and in peace.”

While concluding the discussions of the virtual conference, Dr Mathews George Chunakara stated, “Almost all churches in CCA constituencies including the Asian Diaspora churches in the Arabian Gulf states are deeply involved in addressing the concerns of the worst effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in their respective communities and societies. However, the vulnerable situations faced by the migrant workers or guest workers in our societies need to be considered as a priority concern by more churches in Asia in the coming days, even in the post-COVID-19 crisis period.”

The discussions on the plight of migrant workers amidst the COVID-19 crisis was not meant to be a singular event, but the beginning of new initiatives as a platform to share best practices and learn from churches, related organisations, and faith-based groups working with governments to alleviate the distressing conditions of vulnerable migrant workers in Asia and the Gulf region, added the CCA General Secretary.

# Churches in Asia Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis

7 May 2020



Mathews George



S. Inudaya Rajan



Dolores Pelaez



Helen M. Sarkar



Yusmiati Wangka



Changweon Jang



Soman Baby



Brahm Press



Solomon David

# **Churches in Asia Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis**

*7 May 2020*

## **Background and Context**

As the novel COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world, Asian countries experienced an exponential rise in COVID-19 infections and deaths. Asian churches, from the start, were actively engaged in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. Stepping up in service of vulnerable people and communities, they offered support to all in need of it. Expressions of solidarity became more striking, evident in the sharing of resources through a variety of actions such as offering medical equipment and assistance, accommodation and shelter facilities to those affected, food provisions under lockdown, medical care, counselling, and spiritual care for communities. Local congregations in many places were directly engaged in extending support to those who were quarantined and those who had lost their livelihoods due to community lockdowns and restrictions on movement.

Churches and related organisations in different places in Asia wholeheartedly collaborated with local governments and civil society organisations to provide necessities (medical masks, sanitisers, soap, food, and water) to those undergoing treatment and those under quarantine during the period of physical distancing and lockdown. Hospitals and medical clinics belonging to churches provided special medical assistance to COVID-19 patients and also made available personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical staff and virus testing kits to state and provincial government hospitals and medical centres in different Asian countries.

The gravity and magnitude of the unprecedented global crisis proved that such pandemics were no longer limited only to densely populated poor countries. It exploded the myth that they would never become a problem in wealthy countries. Unsustainable lifestyles in the modern era which entailed the



destruction of the planet and God's creation have exacerbated the preconditions for such pandemics, and as new viruses and diseases emerge and spread to every corner of the planet, the faults of such socioeconomic structures are exposed. It was clear that so-called higher levels of living standards with apparently well-developed healthcare systems were inadequate and left large numbers of vulnerable people at a greater disadvantage.

The care for all God's creation in God's oikos is integrally linked to the survival and well-being of all creation. This is a reminder of the role of the Church as a caring community which exists to provide love and support to people who are struggling with life's challenges.

Discerning the importance of churches sharing challenges, responses, and learnings gleaned while being engaged in responding to COVID-19, the webinar intended to be a platform for the CCA's member churches and related diaconal organisations to help them nurture spiritual, biblical, and theological reflections and disseminate resources that help to dispel misleading interpretations in the context of the pandemic. It also served to encourage and motivate Asian churches to share a message of hope, solidarity, and accompaniment.

### ***Panellists***

#### **Moderator**

- **Dr Mathews George Chunakara,**  
*General Secretary, CCA*
- **Archbishop Dr Willem T.P. Simarmata**  
*CCA Moderator, from the Huria Kristen Batak Indonesia*
- **Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian**  
*Prelate, Armenian Apostolic Church in Iran*
- **Metropolitan Dr Yakob Mar Irenaios**  
*Chairperson, Churches' Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA) in India*
- **Fr. William (Bill) LaRousse**  
*Deputy General Secretary, Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)*

- **Bishop Reuel Norman Marigza**  
*General Secretary, National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP)*
- **Bishop Leo Paul**  
*Church of Pakistan*
- **Rev. Jacky Manuputty**  
*General Secretary, Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI)*
- **Dr Sawako Fujiwara**  
*Theologian, Lutheran Theological Seminary and Rikkyo University, Japan*

## Webinar Report

“The Church lives, thrives, and plays a crucial role in accompanying the suffering people and communities while serving as a beacon of hope and compassion amidst the COVID-19 crisis. It is time for the Church in Asia to redefine what the Church is and reposition its role in a changing context. Though we are challenged by sufferings and miseries of innumerable people who are affected by the spread of the novel COVID-19, our fortitude, faith, and hope in God’s unwavering assurance inspire us to find a cause for glorifying God in our troubles. God of all creation feels our pain, sees our tears, and cares about our challenges,” stated the Asian ecclesiastical and ecumenical leaders who were panellists of the virtual conference on ‘Churches in Asia Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis’. The Asian church leaders urged that churches should serve as a beacon of hope and compassion amidst the COVID-19 crisis.

In his opening remarks, the CCA General Secretary Dr Mathews George Chunakara, who moderated and facilitated the online conference, said that the COVID-19 crisis was a ‘loud wake-up call for the world’. He remarked that the proliferation of the virus had shattered myths about global levels of development, which were, in fact, quite unsustainable. “The spread of COVID-19 has

exposed our inadequacies in catering to the most vulnerable in our midst, and it is vital to re-examine the role of our churches in this new world,” he said.

The virtual conference’s eight specially invited panellists, who represented the CCA’s member churches, councils, and the FABC, shared their profound insights and observations. The key focal points of the webinar centred around discussions on faith and witness amidst the crisis, the diaconal mission of Asian churches, Asian churches’ inter-church cooperation and collaboration with governmental agencies, and appropriate spiritual, biblical, and theological responses to the common suffering of the world today.

Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian, the Prelate of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Iran, said that the suffering wrought by COVID-19 was unanimous and that ‘the whole world was handicapped by a tiny virus’. Quoting Romans 5:4, he said, “...but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope.”

Archbishop Sarkissian said that his church kept encouraging its members in their faith and Christian existence, as the main spiritual weapon possessed was hope. He spoke of the necessity of holding on to hope in dark times like these and reminded the participants of Paul’s message on the role of hope in the life of the Christian church. “Difficulties are a part of life,” said the Archbishop, while explaining that though we may be physically distant, such tough times have brought us closer to each other.

Metropolitan Dr Yakob Mar Irenaios, the Chairperson of CASA in India, entreated that we must not permit the virus to enter our minds. Although the lockdown was a shock for all, he highlighted the plight of labourers and workers in the informal economy in India and the urgency needed in the churches’ actions to alleviate their condition. Indian churches were at the forefront of relief work for migrants and daily labourers, reaching out to millions of people. He also emphasised the need for sensitivity in the responses of the churches—especially in areas where physical distancing was not possible and where there was a severe lack of potable water to maintain personal hygiene.

Metropolitan Mar Irenaios also called upon Asian churches to look inwards and reflect upon their purpose and mission in today's world. He said it was time for the churches to forsake luxury and reorient their priorities and intentions. He also added that the crisis offered a unique opportunity for the churches to innovate in their ministries.

Bishop Leo Paul, from the Church of Pakistan, spoke of the unique challenges faced by the minorities in Pakistan, an Islamic majority country. Churches and other social organisations were limited to relief work only in large cities and were unable to concentrate their efforts in rural areas, where help was needed the most. While minorities did not face institutional-level discrimination, their needs were deprioritised and largely ignored at the grassroots level.

Bishop Leo also said that most funds of the churches were frozen during the critical response period, and this impacted the rate at which churches could address the needs of communities. The people in Pakistan were about to face a severe food security crisis, an economic crisis, a social crisis, and a mass psychological crisis in rapid succession, he said, unless serious and concrete measures were taken to ameliorate the condition of the general populace.

Rev. Jacky Manuputty, the General Secretary of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), said that the churches in Indonesia responded to the WHO's warning about the global pandemic with immediacy and urgency. The PGI sent out pastoral letters detailing propositions for maintaining physical distancing, recommendations for family-based worship, guidelines for handling the burial of COVID-19 victims, and other practical suggestions for maintaining general health and cleanliness. Indonesian churches were encouraged to create more severe and strategic mitigation actions based on the model developed by the PGI to mobilise financial and human resources across the archipelagic country.

Rev. Manuputty also mentioned the initiatives of churches in constructing online platforms to help out small businesses that were struggling under the effects of the crisis. The responsibility of the diaconal mission could not only be considered and carried out by the headquarters of churches, he said, but it was

essential to empower families to carry this task out through local congregations.

Fr. William (Bill) LaRousse, the Deputy General Secretary of the FABC, said that the pandemic, like the climate emergency, affected everyone, regardless of other differences. The Roman Catholic Church in Asia was closely cooperating with national and local government agencies, and Bishops' Conferences in different countries were brought closer as the need to respond entailed listening to other ecclesial communities and their responses and plans. The sudden and unfamiliar situation had led to innovation in church ministry as technology was used to live-stream and broadcast prayer and worship, and there was a heightened awareness of the virtual church as a reality.

Fr. William subsequently spoke of the work of CARITAS, the Roman Catholic Church's charitable organisation that focused on a coordinated response to the pandemic. Schools and other institutions run by the Church were being utilised to house homeless persons, for isolation and quarantine, and in some cases as makeshift residences for healthcare workers to ensure faster access to hospitals. He emphasised the need for constructing recovery programmes and food sustainability measures with care, as the crisis had brought to light underlying humanitarian inequities and the inadequacies of the political-economic system.

Bishop Reuel Norman Marigza, the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, spoke of the collaborative efforts of Protestant, Catholic, and Evangelical councils along with faith-based organisations in providing relief to affected communities. The churches in the Philippines had also released joint statements denouncing the militaristic approach of the government to the task of combatting the pandemic. He called for compassionate service and comprehensive scientific solutions to the pandemic.

Bishop Marigza also spoke of how the churches in the Philippines were challenged by the rules imposed under the lockdown. Unlike other calamities wherein churches could operate openly and without restrictions, churches now needed to obtain permits and faced regulations on bulk purchases. Although the national lockdown had challenged the mobility of aid teams in different parts of the Philippines, churches were able to cater to the needs

of all people in their immediate locality, irrespective of their class or creed; churches in some areas were also able to reach out to isolated indigenous people's communities. He spoke of the painful arrests of aid and care workers and condemned the Filipino government's military-style approach to containing the pandemic.

Dr Sawako Fujiwara, from the Lutheran Theological Seminary/ Rikkyo University in Japan, shared the challenges of catering to a largely elderly congregation with limited access to technology, and the innovation that stemmed from necessity. The United Church of Christ in Japan (UCCJ) initiated a 'document-based' worship service, where resources were sent by post. The 'private worship service' was reminiscent of the monastic tradition of prayer.

Dr Fujiwara observed that a similar mode was followed by the Anglican Church in Japan (Nippon Sei Ko Kai). The Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church also developed a new lending system to help small churches support their pastors. Though the online ministry was effective, she shared that it was not a perfect solution as it reinforced a 'digital divide'.

Archbishop Dr Willem T.P. Simarmata, the Moderator of the CCA, emphasised the impending food crisis in Asian countries. With the fall in income and consumption worldwide, the procurement of food was set to become a bigger challenge than COVID-19 itself. He opined that churches must think one step ahead, anticipate the problems of the future, and be more adequately prepared to handle the crisis.

Sharing the model of the North Sumatra churches in Indonesia, Archbishop Simarmata spoke of the designated funds that were set apart by churches to respond to disasters and calamities. He underscored the necessity of collaborating with other faith groups and civil society organisations to unify relief efforts and ensure that aid reached those who needed it most. He reminded the participants that the Church was called to be a blessing to all.

The most pertinent concern was what the Church would look like in a post-COVID-19 scenario and what changes would be seen in the life of the Church. Panellists across the board propounded that the previous state of the world was not 'normal' and that it

was rife with inequality and unnecessary suffering. “We do not know what the world will look like tomorrow, but we do know that it is our joint responsibility to build a future that is more just and humane,” responded the experienced panellists who represented Asia’s diverse ecclesial and ecumenical landscape.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara concluded the discussions of the virtual conference by saying that the crisis marked a critical point wherein we were called upon to contemplate the inherent fragility of life and the vulnerability of the cosmos. It was crucial to reorient the priorities of the Church as a community of care and compassion which is called to provide love and support to people who are struggling with life’s challenges. Our world needs prayers, cure, and healing especially in times of the COVID-19 crisis, with its devastating effects.



Christian Conference of Asia



## VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

# RIGHT TO HEALTH AMIDST THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Thursday, 14 May 2020 | From 12:00 to 14:00 hrs. (Bangkok Time) |

### PANELLISTS



Dr Mathews George  
CCA General Secretary



Dr Sali Panakadan  
UN



Stela Sacaliuc  
UN



Dr Priya John  
India



Dr Daniel B Wobowo  
Indonesia



Dr Chiao-Chicy Chen  
Taiwan



Dr Prawing Euanontat  
Thailand



Rev Caillum Tabada  
Philippines

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# Right to Health Amidst the COVID-19 Crisis

*14 May 2020*

## Background and Context

The enjoyment of the highest attainable standards of health should be one of the fundamental rights of every human being. The right to health for all people implies that everyone should have access to services that safeguard their health, whenever and wherever they may require it. It is unacceptable to have a situation where loss of life occurs simply because health services could not be accessed owing to poverty or other institutional barriers.

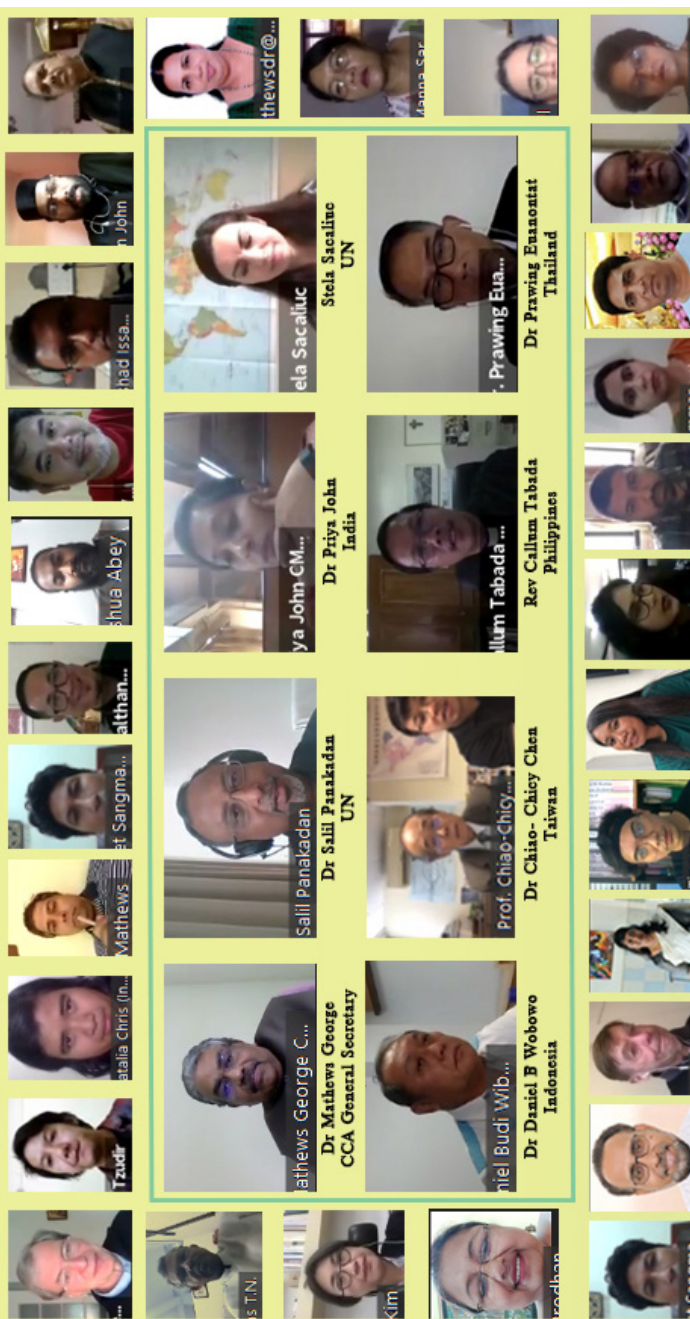
The outbreak of the viral disease COVID-19 escalated to the level of a global pandemic, with its scale and severity characterising it as a public health threat. The pandemic thus was not only a health crisis in the short term but is likely to bear devastating impacts on the socioeconomic lives of people for years to come.

Given that over fifty per cent of the world's population has no access to social protection, the impacts of the crisis were estimated to be manifold. Fragile health systems with under-resourced hospitals and basic medical care facilities were overwhelmed, and this was further exacerbated by a spike in cases, and ultimately, a loss of lives. A vast number of people in lesser-developed countries generally lack access not only to basic healthcare facilities and have fewer health workers but also do not possess living essentials such as potable water, soap, face masks, and sanitisers. As such a situation persists, the pandemic is bound to morph into a prolonged health crisis.

The right to health provides that health facilities, goods, and service should be:

- available in sufficient quantity;
- accessible to everyone without discrimination and affordable for all, even marginalised groups;

# CCA Virtual Conference: Right to Health amidst COVID-19 Crisis



- acceptable, that is, respectful of medical ethics and culturally appropriate; and,
- scientifically and medically appropriate and of good quality.

### ***Human Rights and Human Dignity amidst COVID-19***

There are various aspects of human rights related to health for consideration under the COVID-19 crisis, which include:

1. *Right and correct information*

A rights-respecting response to COVID-19 should ensure that accurate and up-to-date information about the virus, access to services, service disruptions, and other aspects of the response to the outbreak is made available to all.

2. *Ensure quarantines, lockdowns, and travel bans comply with rights norms*

When restrictions such as mandatory quarantine or isolation of symptomatic people are enforced, authorities are obliged to ensure access to food, water, healthcare, and caregiving support. Many elderly people and people with disabilities are dependent on uninterrupted home services and community support and every effort must be taken to sustain these.

3. *Ensure the protection of health workers*

Authorities must minimise the risk of occupational accidents and diseases including ensuring workers have health information and adequate protective clothing and equipment. This means providing health workers and others involved in the COVID-19 response with appropriate training in infection control and equipping them with appropriate protective gear.

4. *Reduce stigma and discrimination, protect confidentiality*

People with infection or disease and their families have often faced discrimination and stigma during public health crises. Since the coronavirus outbreak, several cases of bias, racism, xenophobia, and discrimination against people especially of Asian descent have been documented and reported from different parts of the world. The response measures to COVID-19 must not target or discriminate against particular religious or ethnic groups and should be inclusive of and respect the rights of marginalised groups, including people with disabilities, women, children, and elderly people.

5. *Ensure marginalised populations can access healthcare without discrimination*

All healthcare services related to COVID-19 should be provided without stigma and discrimination of any kind, and what should be made clear through public messaging campaigns is that everyone has the right to access healthcare. All services should be made available for migrants, undocumented workers, daily wagers, and vulnerable populations. Governments should also ensure that financial barriers do not prevent people from accessing testing, preventive care, and treatment for COVID-19.

6. *Protect community and civil society organisations*

Civil society organisations as well as those assisting the infected and quarantined patients should be recognised and supported in their work and in their efforts to stem the spread of the virus,.

7. *Target economic relief to assist low-wage workers*

Social distancing, quarantine, and the closure of businesses may have enormous economic consequences. The most vulnerable people are low-wage workers in low-income households. Governments should create mechanisms so that workers affected by COVID-19 do not suffer any loss of income that might deter them from self-isolating to contain the spread of the virus.

While the right to health as a fundamental human right does not guarantee perfect health for all, it includes the government's duty to ensure healthcare for all. The state must take steps, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, to progressively secure the full realisation of health as a human right for all. Civil society and faith-based organisations have a role in ensuring that each state is held accountable for a practical expression of the concern for health equity and the right to health.

The webinar aimed to identify the various ways in which Asian churches and faith-based organisations uphold the dignity and right to health of all God's people amidst the COVID-19 crisis, while also sensitising them on strategies to mitigate the pandemic within their resources and capabilities.

## **Panellists**

### **Moderator**

- **Dr Mathews George Chunakara,**  
*General Secretary, CCA*
- **Dr Salil Panakadan**  
*Regional Adviser, UNAIDS Asia Pacific Regional Support Team (RST)*
- **Stella Sacaliuc**  
*Executive Officer, UNAIDS Asia Pacific RST*
- **Dr Priya John**  
*General Secretary, Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI)*
- **Dr Daniel Budi Wobowo**  
*Indonesian Christian Association of Health Services (PELKESI)*
- **Dr Prawing Euonontat**  
*Medical Ministry, Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT)*
- **Prof. Chiao-Chicy Chen**  
*Health and Healing Ministry, Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT)*
- **Rev. Callum Tabada**  
*Medical Mission, United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP)*

### **Webinar Report**

“Securing the right to health implies more than just access to health services but constitutes the right to the determinants of health along with the absence of discrimination. Successfully tiding over the COVID-19 crisis would entail collaboration not just between affected people or communities and the government, but also civil society and faith-based organisations as well as intergovernmental agencies,” stated the expert panellists of the

CCA's virtual conference on 'Right to Health amidst the COVID-19 Crisis'.

The panellists represented the United Nations, Christian Medical Associations in Asia, Christian Hospital Networks in Asia, and representatives of health and healing ministries of Asian churches.

Given that a vast number of lesser-developed countries in Asia lack basic healthcare facilities and have fewer health workers, the fragile health systems in these countries with their under-resourced hospitals are likely to be overburdened by the COVID-19 crisis, thus compromising access and the right to health for all. The right to health entails not just the presence of medical institutions, but more crucially, the availability of medical goods, services, and health facilities that are of accurate and appropriate scientific and medical quality, available in sufficient quantity, can be accessed without discrimination, and are acceptable in terms of medical ethics.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, the General Secretary of the CCA who moderated the virtual conference, introduced the theme and said in his opening remarks that the COVID-19 pandemic presented an overwhelming public health challenge where the health, freedom, and livelihood of millions of people were negatively affected. The right to health is a fundamental human right and constituted the core of living a life with dignity. "When we observe the situation that is emerging due to the COVID-19 crisis, innumerable instances and examples are indicating the violation of the right to health and the right to life, and we find that the basic necessities of life as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are denied to millions," he said.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara further highlighted the scale and severity of the crisis and spoke of the obligation of governments, civil society organisations, and faith-based organisations to provide health care — under the ambit of the right to health as defined by the WHO in 1946 and the UDHR in 1948.

Dr Salil Panakadan, the Asia Pacific Regional Adviser of the United Nations AIDS division, shared the realistic approaches that could be adopted to address the challenges to the health and well-being of all people. He advised that governments develop a

long-term strategy with carefully tailored solutions and enable communities to be partners in national affairs, rather than enforcing coercive top-down lockdowns that generated stigma and discrimination against those infected and those fighting the virus at the frontlines.

From the perspective of the intergovernmental organisation, Dr Panakadan proposed a multi-sectoral strategy that focused on three broad streams, namely, 'health', 'humanitarian', and 'socioeconomic', as was done by the UN. He also suggested ways in which the UN and FBOs could collaborate and highlighted 'country coordinating mechanisms' that FBOs could partner with to secure funding for providing livelihood support, insurance coverage, and other medical resources.

Dr Priya John, the General Secretary of the CMAI (India), spoke of the resourcefulness and prompt work undertaken by healthcare institutions with a distinct Christian mission identity. Despite the constraints on their resources in the wake of the pandemic, mission hospitals, with their self-led initiatives, were crucial to the well-being of the communities around them. Health workers were actively working in communities, distributing medical help and food rations, and generating awareness on sanitation and hygiene. Tele-counselling services were also set up to cater to the mental well-being of people.

Dr John also spoke of the advocacy efforts of Indian health networks such as the Christian Coalition for Health (CCH) which contributed to 'education, ethics, and policy formation', while cooperating and coordinating fully with government departments. The CCH voiced concerns for the plight of vulnerable populations who could not access national health insurance schemes and were more susceptible to slipping through the cracks.

Dr Daniel Budi Wobowo, of the Indonesian Christian Association of Health Services (PELKESI), pointed out that the sudden arrival and spread of the virus in the country exposed the lack of preparedness and foresight in anticipating the magnitude of the pandemic. However, what was noteworthy was the efforts taken by the Indonesian government to assuage the severity of the virus. These efforts included paying for the tests and treatment of all who were affected.

Dr Wobowo highlighted three indicators for governments to act on in their efforts at mitigating the COVID-19 crisis, namely 'knowledge' (community awareness and correct information), 'tools' (mass screening, medical resources, quarantine facilities, nutritious food) and 'support' (socioeconomic relief packages and stimulus). PELKESI, he said, was instrumental in securing funding and played a facilitating role by conducting thorough needs assessments.

Ms Stela Sacaliuc, Executive Officer, UNAIDS Asia and Pacific RST, shared lessons learnt from the earlier HIV-AIDS pandemic and emphasised that community engagement was the key in successfully overcoming the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. She emphasised the need for governments to approach communities as key partners and ensure that relief efforts percolated to the most vulnerable (women, children, elderly, and other vulnerable groups). Governments needed to prioritise and invest in community-based service delivery.

As experience had shown prevention to be the only way of beating a pandemic, Ms Sacaliuc said that at the heart of the government's response should be mass testing, augmented by isolation, quarantine, and contact tracing. Accompaniment with communities and collaboration with CSOs and FBOs was necessary to ensure that no one was left behind while distributing care and relief, she said. She also asked for the prioritisation of the safety of healthcare providers at the frontlines in battling the virus.

Prof. Dr Chiao-Chicy Chen, from Taipei Mackay Memorial hospital of the PCT (Taiwan), shared how church-owned institutions in Taiwan have upheld the right to health amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Taiwan already had a robust healthcare system in place, ample support was provided to the frontline staff in terms of ensuring access to adequate PPE, reasonable shifts, and access to nutritious food, thus catering to their physical and psychological health. The special needs of persons with disabilities were also a key focus of the medical response of Christian health networks in Taiwan.

Dr Prawing Euonontat, Chairman of the Medical Mission of the Church of Christ in Thailand, said that the department was responsible for providing medical treatment that included

physical, mental, social, and spiritual support during the COVID-19 crisis. Churches and church-owned hospitals complemented the work of the government and focused specifically on reducing risk among vulnerable populations like the elderly and young children. Medical consultation was provided online and medicines were delivered to patients' homes to adhere to the norms of social distancing and restrictions on large gatherings. He called for international solidarity and coordination to combat the spread of the virus.

Rev. Callum Tabada of the UCCP (Philippines) highlighted the advocacy role of churches on policy and guideline matters of governments to ensure that the right to health was respected and protected during the current pandemic. Pastoral letters containing information about the virus and recommendations for hygiene and sanitation were sent out by the churches even before the government did so.

Rev. Tabada spoke of how the churches in the Philippines were instrumental in distributing material relief and funds to hospitals. They supplemented the work of hospitals by initiating campaigns for mass testing and raising awareness among communities. He also said that instances of mental health illnesses were being underreported in the crisis and that churches were providing online counselling for their people.

The webinar served as a platform to share best practices and inspire all attendees into action. While the global situation may be grim, the key to successfully mitigating the crisis and restoring the right to health of all people was accompanying communities and making them salient partners in decision-making. "It is easier to prevent than to treat," said the panel, while unanimously stressing the importance of community-based recovery with localised solutions in cooperation with government measures that were mindful of the needs and situation of the people. Doing so would be more effective than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Although resources were scarce, it was possible to implement the lessons from previous epidemics and develop strategic partnerships and cater to the holistic needs of the people – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Thus, FBOs and CSOs were also key players in securing and protecting everyone's right to health.

While concluding the discussions, Dr Mathews George Chunakara stated that understanding health as a human right creates a legal obligation on states to ensure access to timely, acceptable, and affordable health care of appropriate quality as well as providing for the underlying determinants of health. There is a wide range of criticism and concern surrounding government responses to the crisis, which have involved sweeping restrictions on the right to health of people in many contexts and excessive restrictions on freedom of movement, expression, and assembly. He suggested that in the context of a spreading epidemic, states, CSOs, and FBOs have obligations to ensure that preventive care, treatments, goods, services, and information are available and accessible to all persons.

# **Upholding the Dignity and Rights of Children Amidst the COVID-19 Crisis**

*19 May 2020*

## **Background and Context**

The looming global crisis, a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, could plunge the futures of thousands of children into grave vulnerability. A news report recently issued by the United Nations entitled *UN Chief Calls for Greater Protection for Children Caught Up in COVID-19 Crisis*, warned that children risk being among the biggest victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. While children were largely spared the direct health effects of the disease, the crisis bore profound effects on their overall well-being. All children, of all ages and in all countries could be catastrophically affected in particular by the crisis' socioeconomic consequences and in some cases by the mitigation measures implemented to stem the spread of the disease.

As part of the lockdown measures initiated by governments, schools and educational institutions have been shut down worldwide. In Asia, distance-learning or online learning is tough to implement, given the slow and poor internet services in most countries. Adversely, in technologically-advanced countries, learning processes held in virtual classrooms inherently results in children spending more time online, thus risking their safety in the virtual world. Adults with malicious intent preying on young children on the internet made children susceptible to cyber-bullying or online sexual exploitation.

The uncertainty of life post the virus has threatened the lives of middle- and lower-class families, who bear the brunt of unemployment and job insecurity. As resources of the family become scarcer, education takes a backseat. Limited income can also mean access to less nutritious food, which can adversely affect the healthy growth of children in the long term. As the



Christian Conference of Asia



PANELLISTS



Dr Mathews George  
CCA



Rachel Harvey  
UNICEF



Stella Dharshini  
Sri Lanka



John Pattiwael  
Indonesia



Eule R. Bonganay  
Philippines



Sharmila  
Malaysia



Kim Minji  
Korea

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

UPHOLDING THE RIGHTS  
AND DIGNITY OF CHILDREN  
AMIDST COVID-19 CRISIS

Tuesday 19 May 2020  
12.00 -14.00 hrs. (Bangkok Time)



crisis deepens and solidifies anxiety and stress, children at home with their families are at higher risk of becoming victims and witnesses of domestic abuse and violence. For many families, poverty is imminent, and so families are at greater risk of exploitation and human trafficking to make ends meet. The twin issues of reducing the transmission of the virus and mitigating its impact on children while ensuring that children receive essential services are challenges that the world must rise to.

In addition to scaling up necessary precautionary healthcare measures, governments must enforce mitigation and prevention measures to ensure that all children are safe and protected. This includes ensuring access and availability of key supplies and services for children, supporting distance-learning opportunities for children who cannot access school, prioritising mental health and psycho-social support to children and families affected, and sustaining the provision of essential immunisation and other services. However, this responsibility must also be shared by civil society and faith-based organisations to ensure that the needs of children are monitored and addressed, and that the rights and dignity of children are promoted and preserved.

The CCA through its Asian Advocacy Network on the Dignity and Rights of Children (AANDRoC) has been supporting and accompanying the CCA's member constituencies ever since the COVID-19 crisis erupted. It is in this context that the CCA initiated the webinar to mainly discuss the struggles faced by children in Asia in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and to identify the means and measures that Asian churches, CSOs, and FBOs could adopt to preserve the safety and security of children and uphold their dignity and rights amidst the COVID-19 crisis.

## ***Panellists***

### **Moderator**

- **Dr Mathews George Chunakara,**  
*General Secretary, CCA*
- **Rachel Harvey**  
*Regional Adviser on Child Protection, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office*



- **John Pattiwael**  
*Coordinator, AANDRoC*
- **Eule Rico Bonganay**  
*Secretary-General, Salinlahi Alliance of Children's Concerns (Philippines)*
- **Rev. Kim Minji**  
*Human Rights Centre of the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK)*
- **Sharmila Sekarajasekaran**  
*Chairperson, Voice of the Children (Malaysia)*
- **Stella Dharshini**  
*Programme Manager, National Council of Churches in Sri Lanka (NCCSL)*

## **Webinar Report**

“Children have the right to be protected from all forms of discrimination, exploitation and violence. The impacts of COVID-19 containment measures, school closures, and increased stress on families cannot be allowed to trickle down to children. Upholding the dignity and rights of children must be a key priority of governments, civil society organisations, churches, and faith-based organisations; children must be at the heart of the COVID-19 recovery and response,” opined the six panellists representing UNICEF, child rights’ activist networks, and Asian churches and councils at the CCA’s fourth virtual conference, whose focus was on ‘Upholding the Dignity and Rights of Children amidst the COVID-19 Crisis’.

The lockdown situation in many Asian countries has impacted the overall well-being of children, although their physical health was not directly affected by the COVID-19 virus up to this point. The secondary effects of the global pandemic — in particular, its socioeconomic consequences — could, however, catastrophically affect all children.

The General Secretary of the CCA, Dr Mathews George Chunakara who moderated the virtual conference, pointed out in his opening remarks that the needs of children amidst the pandemic had been rendered invisible. It was vital to address their unique and specific needs and affirm them as individuals in their own right.

“The impact of COVID-19 is critical and could permanently damage the well-being of generations to come, and hence, a multi-sectoral response must be put in place to uphold their rights and affirm their dignity. The urgency of ensuring their well-being and development are essential parameters to safeguard future generations as the basic quality of life should be the right of all children,” said the CCA General Secretary.

Rachel Harvey, UNICEF Regional Adviser on Child Protection at East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, reiterated that although children under the age of eighteen were not as directly impacted by the virus as adults, a majority of children had been affected by containment measures and the so-called ‘secondary impact’ of COVID-19.

Speaking of the increased risk of children’s exposure to abuse and violence, Ms Harvey said, “Children have the right to be protected from all forms of abuse, violence, and exploitation. However, containment measures that have kept children at home (such as school closures and movement control) and the effects of these measures have increased the risk of abuse, violent discipline, and exploitation.” Containment measures had intensified the proximity of children to their abusers, while simultaneously cutting off opportunities for children to seek refuge outside of their homes.

Ms Harvey also highlighted the heightened risks of already vulnerable groups of children, such as children with disabilities, children affected by migration, children in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, children living and working on the street, and children in detention — as they struggled to access health, education, and support services, and encountered increased chances of violence, abuse, and exploitation.

John Pattiwael, the Coordinator of AANDRoC, a CCA-initiated ecumenical platform, spoke of the ‘new normal’ that children now had to cope with under COVID-19, given the fact that their

physical contact and social interaction with others was greatly inhibited. The pandemic situation had led to the shift in many of the norms of everyday living for children— such as going to school, socialising with their peers, healthy physical play and recreation outdoors, and so on. He said that children were forced to adapt to the ‘new normal’ of isolation without any adequate preparation.

Mr Pattiwael also emphasised the plight of an extremely marginalised and neglected set of children — children in conflict with the law — who lacked sufficient legal representation and had no access to formal education, social services, and pastoral care. He encouraged churches to devise new forms of pastoral care for families susceptible to domestic violence and increase their access to aid in collaboration with other stakeholders.

Eule Rico Bonganay, Secretary-General of the Salinlahi Alliance for Children’s Concerns in the Philippines, brought to attention the myriad ways in which services were actively provided for children in partnership with churches and other CSOs in the Philippines. The churches and CSOs, he said, were active in advocacy to the government and in providing support to communities in need. As the government’s response was slow and inadequate, several thousands of children who were in already vulnerable conditions were left deprived even further.

Mr Bonganay spoke of the children suffering non-COVID-related illnesses and those with disabilities who could not access medical care given the military-style lockdown imposed in the country. There were widespread violations of children’s rights and instances of grave and inhumane treatment meted out to children who did not adhere to curfew hours.

Sharmila Sekarajasekaran, Chairperson of Voice of the Children in Malaysia, elaborated upon the conditions of those children in conflict with the law, who were confined to detention centres and remand homes. There was a push from civil society organisations to facilitate the release of such children. The government’s response was sporadic and simplistic, focusing only on visible concerns such as the immediate provision of healthcare and food.

Given the ‘shrinking of civil space’, it was even more critical to ensure that the needs of children and their families were met. She spoke of the necessity of CSOs and FBOs to reinvent themselves and create task forces to help them adapt to the changing situation. Ms Sekarajasekaran also shared that the concern was not just about the physical safety of the children, but their mental and emotional health as well.

Rev. Kim Minji, from the Human Rights Centre of the NCKK, shared the initiatives taken by Korean churches to ensure the nourishment of children’s spiritual lives during the COVID-19 crisis. Providing the rationale that the ‘protection of children’s rights is directly related to upholding the human rights of the guardian’, Rev. Minji reported the NCKK has been providing specialised care for families. A unique ‘COVID-19 Human Rights’ network was set up by the collaborative efforts of over 100 civil society organisations to guarantee the rights of children and other minority groups.

Rev. Minji also emphasised the need to reconstruct existing systems. “This is the time to rely on our collective wisdom to go forward, without damaging the essence of our faith. It is important to display willingness and cooperation to tide through these tough times together. Goodwill, solidarity, and sharing is the way of Christ,” she shared.

Stella Dharshini, from the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka, shared information on the concrete steps, measures, and actions taken by the churches in Sri Lanka to ensure the care of children amidst the pandemic. Children’s issues were addressed and novel forms of education and dissemination of information were introduced to ensure the spiritual welfare and strengthen the faith of children. This, she said, also addressed the social alienation that children faced due to the sudden and abrupt lockdown situation in the country.

A special segment in the webinar focused specifically on the mental health needs of children. Rachel Harvey pointed out the nuances involved in estimating the impact of the crisis. “The mental health of children and young people has been impacted by the fear that they or their family members may contract the virus, in addition to fear of the effects of the containment measures, and increased stress in their family. This has been

worsened by the lack of peer support, limited contact with their friends, and the undermining of the capacity of their parents to provide nurturing care and support,” she elaborated.

Registered participants of the webinar, as well as viewers who joined through live-streaming, expressed concerns about the increased risk of online exploitation, grooming, and cyber-bullying that children were exposed to as education services were shifted online in this time of lockdowns. It was necessary to make the online world as safe as possible for children, just as organisations have done for the offline world. Governments, regulators, internet service providers, and social media companies were called upon to step up and fulfil their primary role in ensuring that virtual learning platforms were safe, harmful content was rapidly identified and removed, and cross-border cooperation between justice actors was enhanced so that perpetrators were held to greater accountability.

It was of greater importance, however, that children themselves were informed, equipped, and empowered with the ‘knowledge, skills, and resilience’ to keep themselves safe in the virtual world. Participants also highlighted the potential of churches to equip parents and caregivers with the necessary tools and technical expertise needed to monitor the well-being of children online.

The panellists recommended a multi-level and holistic response to structure the actions of the churches and FBOs in the form of (a) care and guidance for families, (2) strong collaborations with CSOs and intergovernmental agencies, and (3) advocacy with governments, to ensure that all children – be they the ones confined to their homes, or those without homes (such as refugees and migrants) – were taken care of, with no child left behind.

In his concluding remarks, Dr Mathews George Chunakara said that as the crisis deepened, family stress levels were also rising, and children confined at homes were both victims and witnesses of increasing levels of domestic violence and abuse. Besides, increasing unemployment had shrunk family finances, which in turn triggered abuse and violence within families, with children often ending up as victims.

He added, “This virtual platform hosted and facilitated by CCA has served as a fruitful exercise to understand the profound impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on children across Asia. The challenges future generations will face far exceed the COVID-19 pandemic, and the hidden impacts must be revealed and immediately tackled to uphold the dignity and rights of children. Churches, FBOs, and CSOs must collectively strive to accompany the most vulnerable of our society during and after the present global crisis.”

# **The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Women in Asia: Vital Needs and Post-Crisis Recovery**

*21 May 2020*

## **Background and Context**

The proliferation of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world has already gravely affected women, with its impacts and consequences likely to deepen as countries struggle to contain the crisis. Imminent effects and potential threats to the well-being of women have been reported in the form of preventable maternal deaths, unavailability or limited access to family planning means, and increases in the incidence of gender-based violence and domestic abuse, in addition to other harmful consequences,

While containment and lockdown measures are essential in mitigating the spread of the virus, they adversely affect the socioeconomic well-being of people around the world. The ongoing crisis has crippled the informal and organised sectors, of which women make up a disproportionate percentage of workers (almost 90 per cent in Asia). Textile and service industries with predominantly female workers have been the worst-hit by the crisis. Bangladesh's garment industry laid off more than a million workers, of which 80 per cent were women. Given the already-persistent lack of protection under labour laws and negligible access to paid sick leave or health insurance, women were now even more vulnerable and were at greater risk of falling into unrelenting poverty. Trends in Asia revealed that even when formally employed, women were often the most dispensable and were the first to lose their jobs.

The plight of women healthcare workers in South and Southeast Asian countries, who have been at the frontlines in combatting the disease, has worsened in light of longstanding gender inequalities. Globally, 67 per cent of workers in healthcare are women. Physically and mentally exhausted, nurses worked round-



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LIVE

## Virtual Conference

Thursday 21 May 2020  
12.00 - 14.00 hrs. (Bangkok Time)

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN IN ASIA: VITAL NEEDS AND POST-CRISIS RECOVERY

### PANELLISTS



**Kyrie Kim**  
South Korea



**Sotheavy Srey**  
Cambodia



**Mathews George**  
CCA



**Nirmala Gurung**  
YWCA



**Melissa Alvarado**  
UN Women



**D. Ilangasinghe**  
Sri Lanka



**Diana Tana**  
New Zealand



**Basil Fernando**  
Hong Kong



**Maya Dania**  
Indonesia

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the-clock to provide care putting themselves and their families at risk of infection, even as the demand for PPE far outstripped supply.

Simultaneously, women typically shoulder greater domestic responsibilities in terms of caring for the children and the elderly in their families. The crisis has added to the domestic workload of women with severe impacts on their health and safety. While households are said to be typically 'safe spaces' under lockdown in terms of physical distancing, they can become sites of increased domestic violence and abuse as women were now 'locked up' with their perpetrators. As COVID-19 placed economic stress on thousands of families, children, and in particular, girls, were at greater risk of exploitation.

Long-term closures of schools and critical education providers resulted in increasing drop-out rates, which disproportionately affected adolescent girls. Although education service providers shifted to online modes of delivery, a large number of girls were least likely to have access to the necessary technology. This is likely to have compounded negative effects and to exacerbate gender gaps in education and increase the risk of sexual exploitation, child marriage, forced marriage, and early and unwanted pregnancies in several Asian countries. Girls, especially those from marginalised communities and those with disabilities, would be particularly affected by the secondary impacts of the outbreak.

Although several women's groups and organisations across Asia were directly engaged in responding to the crisis, what must be realised is that the impact of COVID-19 is experienced by women not only during the pandemic but will also persist in the long run in various forms. It is, therefore, critical to initiate measures with concrete action plans in the post-crisis recovery phase to ensure improved response capabilities while addressing the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on women.

Efforts in the short term must include coordinated health responses to suppress transmission and end the pandemic while scaling up capacities for testing and treatment. Governments must prioritise the provision of assistance to women who are less privileged or are marginalised in the social structures of Asian societies. Additionally, it is also crucial to address the devastating

social and economic dimensions of the crisis, and the design of post-crisis relief and stimulus packages must be undertaken with a focus on the unique needs of women. Given that the economic challenges and shocks suffered by women are more likely to expose them to increased exploitation, abuse, and high-risk work, post-crisis care cannot afford to invisibilise the needs of Asian women.

The webinar aimed to serve as a forum wherein the magnitude of the issues and challenges faced uniquely by women amidst the COVID-19 crisis was understood, the endeavours of Asian churches and women's organisations in serving women to deal with and respond to the pandemic are shared, and deliberations on catering to the vital needs of Asian women as well as the design of the post-crisis recovery are initiated.

### ***Panellists***

#### ***Moderator***

- **Dr Mathews George Chunakara,**  
*General Secretary, CCA*
- **Melissa Alvarado**  
*UN Women, Asia Pacific*
- **Maya Dania**  
*Lecturer, Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand*
- **Basil Fernando**  
*Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Hong Kong*
- **Sotheavy Srey**  
*Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT), Cambodia*
- **Rev. Kyrie Kim**  
*Chairperson, CCA Programme Committee*
- **Nirmala Gurung**  
*YWCA Asia, Nepal*
- **Deekshya Illangasinghe**  
*Director, South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), Sri Lanka*

## Webinar Report

The fifth virtual conference hosted and facilitated by the CCA on 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Women in Asia: Vital Needs and Post-Crisis Recovery' affirmed that "the COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected women around the world, and the urgent and pressing needs of women must be addressed not only during the crisis but should be made part of the post-pandemic crisis recovery. Gender-sensitive policies that recognise and respond to women's needs will benefit not just women but society at large."

A myriad of severe issues that are cyclical and closely associated with each other have come to light as the global COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged the world. The crisis has revealed some of the deepest flaws of the structures of our society, a core issue being gender inequality. Women seem to suffer the brunt of the cumulative direct and indirect effects of the crisis, which has exposed the persistent and institutional nature of gender inequality.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, the General Secretary of the CCA, moderated the virtual conference and initiated the discussions in each segment. He explained the socioeconomic consequences of the crisis and what it meant for the future of millions of women in Asia, saying, "As this unprecedented crisis spawns across the world today and the situation spins out of control in many parts of the world, several impacts of COVID-19 are affecting women in the hardest ways. The spread of COVID-19 is not only a global health pandemic, but it is also substantially affecting people's livelihoods, especially those of women."

"Across the globe, we know that women are paid less and save less. They tend to hold less secure positions in their jobs and have less access to social protection. We know that domestic gender-based violence spikes when disaster strikes and the emerging situation in Asia is not entirely different," the CCA General Secretary stated.

It was in the light of this awareness that CCA initiated the webinar and brought together leaders in the field of human rights and gender issues to discuss the plight of women amidst

the COVID-19 crisis, said Dr Mathews George while introducing the panellists.

Melissa Alvarado, from the UN Women Asia Pacific Office, elaborated on core issues related to the gender impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. The first was security; in places where military-style lockdown measures were enforced by a predominantly male police force, there were potential risks of misconduct and increased use of violence instead of de-escalation. The second was intimate partner violence which was reported from many parts in Asia. The preoccupation with COVID-19 led to a diversion of resources from those who needed it, and women were being turned down at hospitals and police stations and told to return after the pandemic subsided. The third was the socioeconomic impact. There was an increase in care burdens and gendered expectations in families. The combination of time constraints due to housework, lack of technological education, and minimal access to devices meant that women could not be 'more present' in the workforce.

The COVID-19 crisis halted the advancement and gains already made in several areas of women's rights. Alvarado said that gender equality was a priority that was written into all SDGs (the UN's Sustainable Development Goals), and gender sensitisation needed to be deeply integrated into all decisions, security, and design of recovery. "Women think differently, they provide unique solutions and innovation. Women's voices must lead the decisions about women's lives," Ms Alvarado emphatically stated.

Maya Dania, a young Indonesian lecturer who teaches at the Mae Fah Luang University in Thailand, spoke on how the COVID-19 pandemic had spawned a 'new lexicon' in the description of gender relations. She mentioned the trend of 'COVID-divorce', which was caused by boredom and gender stigmatisation under lockdown. She also highlighted certain COVID-related sexist cultural phenomena, where cartoons and memes were used in Malaysia and Indonesia as advisories on soft-spoken and mild demeanours that women could model to 'prevent' domestic violence against themselves and 'appease' their frustrated partners.

Traditional gender roles were being strongly reinforced, said Ms Dania. She also mentioned the WHO's observation that the

lack of access to contraceptive measures could lead to a spike in unplanned pregnancies, thus pushing a large number of women towards greater health risks. This was worrying given the fact that pregnant women were among the most susceptible to contracting the COVID-19 virus. What was needed, she said, was an urgent and quick response that included vulnerability assessment and advocacy to stop violence against women, minimise accidental pregnancies, and reduce maternal/infant mortality in Asia.

Nirmala Gurung, from YWCA Asia (Nepal), focused on the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis on women working in the informal sectors of the economy. Women formed the majority of the workforce in the informal economy and often took up low-paying, high-risk jobs. Given their social disadvantages, poor working conditions, and negligible social security, they had fewer resources at their disposal. As such, women workers depended on their daily earnings to survive, and the closure of industries (and by extension, the economy) would result in them falling into extreme and persistent poverty, she warned.

“We need intersectional perspectives,” said Ms Gurung, recommending that churches and FBOs carefully analyse the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and initiate online and offline support for women in their communities. Issues had to be vocalised and solidarity had to be creatively demonstrated to reignite hope.

Srey Sotheavy, the Director of ACT (Cambodia), spoke of the widespread human rights abuse occurring under the COVID-19 crisis. The loss of income pushed many families into micro-finance debts and the women of such families were being exploited by private moneylenders, she highlighted. NGOs and CSOs that decried the harassment faced a backlash from the government and several activists and community leaders had been detained. Petitions for the implementation of life-saving measures such as the distribution of medical supplies and the suspension of rent and debt collection were being turned down, she said.

Deekshya Illangasinghe, Director of SAHR (Sri Lanka), shed light on the conditions of women migrant workers. COVID-19-related issues exacerbated the challenges migrant women workers already faced. Such women workers tended to be essential workers and were exposed to the virus. Institutional responses

were also not conducive to their condition. In the Arabian Gulf, the UAE government had allowed companies to restructure job contracts to lower salaries, pressure workers into taking unpaid leave, and even terminate employment. Domestic workers and housemaids who were highly dependent on their employers during the lockdown faced a drastic loss of income. It was important to create provisions for the reintegration and rehabilitation of returning migrant women workers, she emphasised.

Ms Illangasinghe suggested the incentivisation of employers to retain their workforces and the implementation of new regulations to safeguard women domestic workers and essential service providers as part of the post-crisis recovery response.

Rev. Kim Kyrie, from the Anglican Church in Korea, shared the initiatives taken by women's groups and women departments of churches during the COVID-19 crisis in the country. "Korean churches and organisations are working together and ensuring all women in Korea are beneficiaries of the same information, and receive the same care, regardless of nationality, religion, situation, or age," she said while outlining how partnerships were forged to provide food, quarantine facilities, and medical and menstrual products for those who needed it.

"It is the role of the Church and Christians to ensure solidarity against the discrimination of those who are socially disadvantaged, those who are vulnerable, and those in the minority— such as women, children, migrant workers, single mothers, abused women, vulnerable women in refugees camps, disabled women, and sexual minorities," said Rev. Kim, hoping that the 'new normal' meant abandoning vested interests in favour of *sangseng*, or living together in cooperation, solidarity, and information-sharing.

Basil Fernando, an internationally recognised human rights defender from the AHRC in Hong Kong, laid stress on the successes of women leaders of states who had spearheaded swift and appropriate government responses against COVID-19.

Mr Fernando said that the participation of women in different spheres must be escalated to leadership. Such a leadership model

should be all-inclusive and must include the voices of the most disadvantaged women, not just those of the most educated.

CSOs, the veteran human rights activist believed, should realise their full potential and persist in greater advocacy, despite the shrinking of civil spaces. “This webinar serves as a means to amplify the voices of those who are suffering in this technological age,” he said, commending the CCA’s efforts to address COVID-19-related issues.

Panellists across the board affirmed the importance of faith leaders in shaping the opinions and attitudes of people. They encouraged faith leaders, especially male leaders, to speak up on women’s rights issues. The demand for equality and women’s rights within the church came primarily from women themselves, and so churches needed to be allies for women.

In his concluding remarks, Dr Mathews George Chunakara said that from the past experiences, it was quite possible to project that the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, in particular the imminent global recession, would result in a prolonged dip in women’s job security and income. Today, all countries face the same crisis and none would safely prevail over the COVID-19 crisis by acting alone.

“As we share the same future, all of us must work together to ensure much-needed solidarity and partnership to overcome negative experiences in the ongoing fight against COVID-19,” added the CCA’s General Secretary.

“Gender-equal societies are more sustainable and prosperous, as compared to those where patriarchal practices are still quite deep-seated,” said Dr Mathews George Chunakara, while calling to action all panellists and participants of the webinar.



Christian Conference of Asia



Virtual Conference

# WILL COVID-19 WORSEN FOOD INSECURITY IN ASIA ?

## PANELLISTS



**Mathews George**  
(CCA)



**Kun Li**  
(UN-WFP)



**Tomoko Arakawa**  
(Japan)



**Joyanta Adhikari**  
(Bangladesh)



**Usha Soolapani**  
(India)



**Jae Hak Ahn**  
(ACLGAF Korea)



**Ed Sabio**  
(ECHO Asia)



**Arndniel Baladjay**  
(Philippines)

**Thursday 28 May 2020**  
12.00 -14.00 hrs. (Bangkok Time)

**REGISTER NOW**

# **Will COVID-19 Worsen Food Insecurity in Asia?**

*28 May 2020*

## **Background and Context**

The World Food Programme (WFP) indicated that globally, about 135 million were experiencing life-threatening famine in January 2020. WFP foresees that by December 2020, about 265 million people will face extreme food insecurity due to the novel COVID-19 pandemic. At worst, over thirty countries could experience famine.

While food supplies are currently abundant and food prices are more or less stable now, the novel COVID-19 has a major but still unclear effect on food security in the medium-term and long term. The outbreak of the pandemic could disrupt the food supply chain and affect food security. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, local and national governments must engage in adaptation strategies to respond to the interrupted flow of water and food resources during the pandemic and after the pandemic: including the distribution and use of water, food trade, the post-harvest processing of agricultural produce, fluctuation in the price of food, as well as food safety. Related issues include sustainable agriculture as well as resilience to price and supply fluctuations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an apprehension about an impending escalation in food insecurity. The COVID-19 crisis negatively affects food security as it causes a chain of adverse events to take place, starting with the loss of employment and constraints on mobility, which affect the production, distribution, and sale of food, stoppage of remittances, and the inability to purchase food. As unemployment increases due to closures of establishments, more and more people will be food-insecure.

While COVID-19 is an 'equalising' disease which infects everyone, the probabilities of contracting the infection are dependent on one's financial income, which relates to one's means of livelihood

## CCA Virtual Conference

### The Impact of COVID-19 on Women in Asia: Vital Needs and Post-Crisis Recovery



and location of residence. Over 820 million people, who were already food-insecure before the pandemic, are the worst-hit. The poor have no place to go for 'social distancing' as they are either homeless or live in tightly-packed rundown dwellings with several occupants in slum areas. Even though most governments around the world declared mandatory quarantine and lockdowns for weeks and months, those with adequate financial resources have not been too affected. Quarantine is a luxury the poor cannot afford.

Although many migrant workers, some of whom were already infected, left their locations of work in a hurry to rush home to their villages or home countries, several were not able to return home and were stuck in their locations of work, and found themselves jobless as businesses ground to a halt due to the lockdowns. Stranded migrant workers became invisible and did not qualify for any governmental benefits, having to stand in serpentine queues and crowds for food aid. Joblessness equates to food insecurity, and hence the risk of infection and casualty for the low-income people is greater than that for the middle-class and the economic elite who have the means and can afford hospitalisation and intensive care, while millions upon millions of people in some countries have to fend for themselves.

It is still too early for an accurate assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the economy. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly disrupted the world, with a heavy toll on human lives, economic activities, and food security. What is sure at least at this stage is that an economic downturn will affect the whole world. Such a situation is likely to trickle down to most developing economies, and a global economic slowdown will exacerbate food insecurity.

Surely, lockdowns have led to the flattening of the COVID-19 curve along with flattening the world economy as well, affecting the vast majority of the people, especially the poor. Does the flattening of the COVID-19 curve likewise lead to the flattening of the food curve, which will certainly cause untold suffering to those already rendered jobless? Due to the lockdowns, most labour has ceased, including food production, distribution, and sale, resulting in dwindling food supplies. Farmers have had to



dump fresh agricultural produce in many parts of the world as they could not go across demarcated areas which authorities have cordoned off and quarantined. With restrictions on movements, there are concomitant disruptions in the food supply chains. Social distancing and the resulting reduction in number of workers has affected producers, sellers, buyers, as well as trucking and logistics companies that are in the food supply chains.

The current pandemic aggravates the pre-existing food crisis, causing food insecurity. In this context, the webinar aimed to focus on food insecurity amidst the COVID-19 crisis and explore how the pandemic threatens to affect millions of people already made vulnerable by food insecurity, malnutrition, and the possible threats of food insecurity in the future. The webinar was also an opportunity to ask how deeply globalisation has affected agriculture and the production of staple foods, and how this may change in the post-COVID-19 period.

The webinar aimed to discuss the extent to which the pandemic was already affecting the entire food production and distribution system, how the lockdowns and restrictions on movement within and across countries had hindered food-related logistical services, disrupted entire food supply chains and the availability of food, and had impacted agricultural labour and production, especially in the context of those people who live in the world's poorest countries. The webinar also aimed to offer the opportunity to share the food security situations in different Asian contexts amidst the pandemic, to seek ways in which the impending food security crisis could be averted, to sensitise Asian churches and faith-based organisations about the potential food crisis that will affect millions of people, and to explore how churches, governments, and non-governmental organisations can respond to counter food insecurity in the present and after the crisis ceases.

As the natural consequence of unemployment is hunger, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic will most certainly affect millions of people; thus, the big question is, is the worst of the tragedy yet to come? Will the world experience more hunger and starvation in the coming months?

## ***Panellists***

### **Moderator**

- **Dr Mathews George Chunakara,**  
*General Secretary, CCA*
- **Kun Li**  
*Spokesperson, United Nations World Food Programme (WFP)*
- **Dr Ed Sabio**  
*Director, ECHO Asia*
- **Joyanta Adhikari**  
*Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB)*
- **Usha Soolapani**  
*Director, Thanal Foundation, India*
- **Manosi Abe Chatterjee** *(for Tomoko Arakawa)*  
*Asian Rural Institute (ARI), Japan*
- **Dr Arndniel Baladjay**  
*University of Southern Mindanao, Philippines*
- **Jae Hak Ahn**  
*Associate Secretary, Asian Christian Life-Giving Agricultural Forum, South Korea*

### **Webinar Report**

“Community-led sustainable agriculture is the key to securing food sovereignty in Asia. As agriculture, livelihood, and food security are intertwined, it is vital to construct the right structures, infrastructures, and incentives in the post-crisis recovery period and ensure that the most vulnerable are protected from the worst effects of the disruption in food production and supply. The multifaceted COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating vulnerabilities in food production, processing, and distribution, and might lead

to the risk of persistent starvation for millions of people — and hence, adequate advanced preparation is needed for tackling food insecurity in the long run,” opined experts specialising in food security and sustainable agriculture at the sixth virtual conference organised by the CCA.

The panellists — experts in food security who represented the United Nations World Food Programme (UN-WFP) as well as civil society organisations and faith-based organisations which promote sustainable agricultural practices — discussed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on food security and sustainable food production in the short, medium, and long term. They also explored the restructuring of a new agrarian culture for increased food production and sustainability in Asia aimed at enhancing food security in the future.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, the General Secretary of the CCA, who moderated the session, introduced the theme and said that even before the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the issue of food security was a grave concern in several countries in the world. The pandemic had worsened the risks of food insecurity in Asia, with the lockdown situations, constraints on mobility, and loss of employment affecting food production, supply, and distribution, and the curtailment of the ability of millions of vulnerable people to procure and purchase food.

Focusing on the necessity of discussing the theme at hand, Dr Mathews George Chunakara explained that as part of the reflection and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing crisis, it was the need of the hour to discern the relationship between the global pandemic and food insecurity. The UN-WFP had warned of a ‘looming global humanitarian catastrophe’ as COVID-19 could double the number of people who would face acute hunger and starvation by the end of 2020.

Loss of income and a parallel steep rise in food prices had led to a decline in consumption and purchasing power of people from poor and vulnerable communities. As malnutrition due to limited food intake could lead to weakened immune systems, large swathes of the Asian populace were at a greater risk of contracting the virus. Thus, it was imperative to design inclusive recovery solutions for food sustainability even in the post-crisis period, added Dr Mathews George Chunakara.

Kun Li, a spokesperson for the UN-WFP, noted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on agriculture, livelihood, and food security in Asia. She said that 65 million people in the Asia Pacific region were susceptible to food shortages and described the situation as ‘grave’ and ‘needing urgent attention from policy-makers’. “The economic impact will inflict more pain than the virus itself and will erode the developmental gains made so far,” she said.

Encouraging governments to minimise the risk to their citizens, Ms Li said that countries must modify their existing social safety nets to counter the unique challenges posed by the pandemic. Care needed to be taken to ensure that vulnerable sections of society — for example, migrant workers and those employed in informal sectors — did not slip through the cracks. Although overall food production had not been affected, it was the supply chain disruption and availability of labour that would pose issues in the future. Severe climate change events in the upcoming months, such as floods, landslides, and droughts, along with armed conflict in some states were likely to compound hunger.

Dr Ed Sabio, Director of ECHO Asia, who focused on the need to help smallholder farmers and the poor in Asia to improve food security and livelihoods, emphasised the value of local and community-level perspectives on food security.

“None of us has prior experience with a pandemic or crisis of this magnitude,” stated Dr Sabio, providing the rationale for the necessity of an intersectional lens and collaboration while resolving the food crisis. The voices of small-scale farmers were crucial in securing meaningful and inclusive partnerships with governments, he said, while stressing the importance of stimulating community food systems, supporting family farming, and developing sustainable agricultural technologies.

Dr Sabio shared the lessons to be integrated into the post-recovery design, saying that family farming was resilient against risk and that biodiverse food sources provided insulation against malnutrition. He favoured creating internal interdependencies rather than international ones and also opined that an immediate short term strategy to mitigate the impact of the food crisis would be to distribute seeds to communities so that they could immediately replant and produce their own food.

Manosi Abe Chatterjee, a young staff member from the ARI (Japan), focused on training in sustainable agriculture through integrated organic farming and community building to share food. She detailed the country-specific situation, pointing especially to the dismal food self-sufficiency of Japan which has remained below 40 per cent. Mobility constraints and supply chain disruptions had severely reduced Japan's food imports.

Ms Chatterjee said this was risky given that several households would not be able to secure food. Conversely, the closure of the tourism sector meant that huge amounts of food (both raw and processed) was left unsold, and food with no buyers in the sector was abandoned and left to rot. This paradox implied that though there was sufficient food, hunger persisted and there was no distribution of food among families in need. She advocated the promotion of farming as a viable profession for young people in rural areas to achieve self-sufficiency and to grow food domestically. She also reminded the participants of their responsibility as consumers, asking them to be mindful of some of their food consumption patterns that were potentially damaging; for example, procuring foods available beyond seasons and consuming more imported food rather than locally-produced food.

Usha Soolapani, Director of Thanal, a collective of nature enthusiasts trying to promote an environmentally conscious generation in India, said that employment in agriculture in the country was unstable and unpredictable given the seasonality of the sector. Although the procurement of food grains was possible, the public distribution system was flawed and did not work initially. She dissuaded competition among farmers and denounced the free market system while saying that farmers' collectives and community development were key in tiding over the food crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ms Soolapani also brought attention to the issue of urban malnutrition, as families' intake of nutritional food was compromised due to financial constraints under the COVID-19 crisis. Several communities had ceased to grow biodiverse foods due to the macro-globalised food systems. While rural communities were able to consume more biodiverse food, this was not the case in urban areas. She recommended that CSOs

and FBOs in urban areas design and initiate community gardens to cater to the nutritional needs of vulnerable communities. She also encouraged establishing relationships between farmers' collectives and schools, where schools who had the facilities to do so could engage their students in small-scale agriculture.

Rev. Jae Hak Ahn, Associate Secretary of the Asian Christian Life-Giving Agricultural Forum in South Korea, said that life prior to the crisis was one of suffering for farmers due to free trade, plantation farming, and large-scale monocropping – all of which are fundamental consequences of globalisation; the collapse of trade barriers and the tyranny of multinational agricultural enterprises over farmers in poor Asian countries caused rural communities to disintegrate and deprived farmers of seeds sovereignty, which reduced their vocations to mere businesses.

Rev. Ahn called the world's churches to action and exhorted them to take the lead in building communities based on 'life-giving agriculture'. He said, "Churches must go further in their faith communities of worship, restore relationships with nature, and save lives! The land held by the world's churches and their denominations should be made accessible free-of-charge to rural church members. Churches should provide the foundation for self-reliant farming, return the rights to their crops to farmers, and promote a path of coexistence through the transactions of agricultural products between rural and urban churches." This would become the way to revive a new agrarian culture by restoring food sovereignty and strengthening local life-worlds in the face of globalisation, he concluded.

Joyanta Adhikari, from the CCDB (Bangladesh), spoke of the effects of COVID-19 crisis on income and consumer spending of marginalised sectors in Asian countries and how the lockdown situation and loss of employment affected people in terms of their food security, food choices, and nutritional intake.

Mr Adhikari termed the scale of the crisis as 'unprecedented' and also reported the devastating impacts of climate change on harvest volumes. He emphasised the importance of investing in innovation and research and said that climate-resilient agricultural techniques and technologies were the need of the hour.

Dr Ardniel Baladjay, Director of the Agricultural Education and Extension Department from the University of Southern Mindanao in the Philippines, stated that there were collaborations between different government departments and state universities on projects to enable food security via community-level food production, processing, and marketing. The Filipino Department of Agriculture was ensuring a supportive policy framework, public investment, and support services needed for domestic and export-oriented businesses, and were also re-aligning programmes to address continuity in the food supply chain.

Dr Baladjay emphasised the need to strengthen credit and support services to develop farmer-oriented seed supermarket supply chains and revive science-based farm extension service programmes. He spoke of the construction of a 'new agrarian culture' to enhance food security in the future, which included the realignment of existing priority programme to preserve the continuity of food supply chains.

Across the board, the panellists unanimously agreed that massive agrarian restructuring was necessary to mitigate the impending food crisis. Globalisation and the domination of the global food supply chain by giant trade corporations had led to a mammoth and complex system with several interconnected dependencies, thus exacerbating the vulnerability of certain developing countries in Asia. It was vital to strengthen food sovereignty and reduce the trade sensitivity of countries while empowering farmers to extricate themselves from the global system where they were forced to adopt unsustainable practices like monocropping and plantation agriculture.

In his concluding remarks, Dr Mathews George Chunakara noted, "The food crisis was a pre-existing situation that has been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we have made technological advances and have taken it to mean the 'success' of our development models, this has proved to be insufficient in overcoming inequality, poverty, and hunger in the world. It is true that over the past few decades, several Asian countries have advanced agricultural production. The paradox of the situation, however, is that even though food is available in surplus at the macro level, food accessibility at the household level remains a problem, particularly in remote rural areas due to lack of

proper income and purchasing capacity. The impact of COVID-19 is leading the world to unprecedented challenges with deep social and economic consequences, including the compromising of food security and nutrition. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed more uncomfortable realities about the structure of our economies and societies that we must now confront. In this context, the CCA webinar series has been the first step to address and respond to this crisis,” said Dr Mathews George.

The CCA webinar series was initiated as part of the organisation’s advocacy efforts and has served as a platform and forum to share emerging challenges, learn from one another’s best practices, and develop insights and solutions together.

# **Towards Wider Partnerships for Combatting Trafficking in Women and Girls amidst COVID-19**

*1 October 2020*

## **Background and Context**

The COVID-19 pandemic has plunged people across the world into unprecedented health, humanitarian, and economic crises. The damage wrought on both developed and developing countries has exposed the fragility of all our systems and structures. Widening socioeconomic divides has created deep social insecurity. Women and girls are among the most affected demographics as they share the brunt of the impacts of this ongoing crisis, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.

Worrying reports from Asia have shown an increase in trafficking and exploitation of women since the onset of the pandemic. Poverty and unemployment are key drivers for trafficking-in-persons. COVID-19 has led to a significant increase in global economic hardship. UNU-WIDER warns of an additional 500 million people (8 percent of the world's population) pushed into poverty, and the World Bank projects an increase of 50–60 million people in extreme poverty. Rises in unemployment and reductions of household and individual incomes mean that those who were already at risk of trafficking before COVID-19, in particular, low-wage and informal sector workers (again, mostly women and girls) are more likely to find themselves in extreme vulnerability.

Women and girls constituted the majority of detected victims of human trafficking before the outbreak, and now they are being specifically targeted by traffickers during the pandemic. Restrictions of movement, which is already inherent to trafficking for sexual exploitation, is further amplified by lockdown measures and travel prohibitions. Thus, victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation may find themselves pushed “underground” and in grave desperation without an exit route. Moreover, along with



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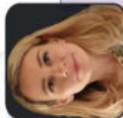


## Towards Wider Partnerships for Combating Trafficking in Women and Girls

### PANELLISTS



**Gaelle Demolis**  
UN Women



**Peppi Siddiq**  
IOM



**Bandana Pattanaik**  
GATW



**Rev. Diana Tana**  
CCA



**Rupa Pradhan Chettri**  
Mukt Nepal



**Rev. Dr. Linjie Pellu**  
PGI Indonesia



**Rev. Marisol Villalon**  
UMC, Philippines

**Thursday 1 October 2020**  
**12.00 -14.00 hrs. (Bangkok Time)**

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[www.cca.org.hk](http://www.cca.org.hk)

the increase in reports of domestic violence, victims of sexual exploitation might face abuse and physical/psychological violence perpetrated by their exploiters, especially when they share the same premises.

The COVID-19 crisis has changed the patterns of sexual exploitation, which is now operating less on the streets and more “indoors” or “online”, as many services (educational, financial, business) migrate to virtual spaces. Young girls are especially susceptible to grooming, the precursor to exploitation and trafficking.

Human trafficking is always invisible. Since outreach activities and pathways to receive assistance and help are disrupted, the identification of victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation might be harder, which makes them more invisible and vulnerable to further exploitation. The COVID-19 pandemic has created new risks and challenges to victims of human trafficking and survivors of trafficking, as a majority of them are women and girls. Violence against women and girls is emerging as a persistent feature of this pandemic, severely undermining women’s fundamental rights and security at a time when the wellbeing of women and girls is critical.

Although many governments have failed to respond to this crisis, grassroots women’s organisations and communities have played a critical role in preventing and responding to trafficking in women and girls. They now require more active support in their efforts. Local women’s organisations, women of faith, and women’s rights activists are providing essential services for those left behind, as well as information, advocacy, and oversight to help ensure that the most marginalised are not further affected by human trafficking. It is imperative for us all to not only survive the COVID-19 pandemic but emerge renewed with women as a powerful force at the centre of recovery.

The challenges of the post-COVID-19 era call for the partnership of women’s organisations for joint actions and advocacy to combat trafficking in women and girls. To reach this ambitious goal, new networks, collective efforts, and leadership of women must be nurtured and sustained. This new type of leadership primarily involves resilience, courage, flexibility, active listening, empathy, collaboration, care, and recognition of collective contributions.

## Towards Wider Partnerships for Combating Trafficking in Women and Girls



The webinar aimed to analyse the ongoing situation and impact of COVID-19 in the acceleration of the trafficking of women and girls in Asia; understand and share preventive measures, advocacy initiatives, and good practices adopted by various actors in combatting trafficking in women and girls; and establish collaborations and partnerships with multilateral agencies, civil society organisations, and faith-based organisations to combat trafficking of women and girls.

### ***Panellists***

- **Rev. Diana Tana**  
*CCA Vice-Moderator*
- **Gaelle Demolis**  
*Programme Specialist for Governance, Peace, and Security, UN Women Asia-Pacific*
- **Peppi Kiviniemi-Siddiq**  
*Senior Regional Migrant Protection Specialist, International Organisation for Migration (IOM)*
- **Bandana Pattanaik**  
*International Coordinator, Global Alliance against Trafficking in Women (GAATW)*
- **Rupa Pradhan Chetri**  
*Mukti Network, Nepal*
- **Rev. Mariesol Villalon**  
*Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Ministry, United Methodist Church (UMC) in the Philippines*
- **Rev. Dr Lintje H. Pellu**  
*Chairperson of Executive Board, Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI)*

### **Webinar Report**

The virtual conference on 'Towards Wider Partnerships for Combatting Trafficking in Women and Girls amidst COVID-19' called for systemic change supplemented with grassroots efforts to tackle the menace of human trafficking.

The panellists and participants of the webinar opined that the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated the difficulties of identification and rescue of victims who were pushed into labour and sex trafficking given the pandemic's economic fallout. They affirmed that "business-as-usual" could not be reverted to and that sustainable and collaborative efforts were needed to eliminate human trafficking in all its forms.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which shows no signs of abating, was causing worrying spikes in the incidence of human trafficking—both trafficking-in-persons and online exploitation. Women and girls, who majorly comprise the victims of trafficking were being specifically targeted by traffickers, given their vulnerabilities. New risks and challenges posed by the pandemic had halted the identification, rescue, rehabilitation, and integration of the victims of human trafficking.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, CCA General Secretary, stated in his introductory remarks that women and girls shared the brunt of the impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The fragility of our systems and structures, as well as the widening of socioeconomic divides, had led to various forms of social insecurity.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara said that the impact of trafficking in women and girls in Asia had become a hidden scourge as it led to sex trafficking. The crimes of human trafficking were not often detected, properly reported, or adequately prosecuted in most Asian countries. He also expressed concerns about the covert and overt ways in which predators and other criminals were now taking advantage of the 'new normal' to expand their dark web of operations.

While introducing the theme, Dr Mathews George Chunakara asked, "Will we be able to save our women and girls from trafficking? Can we effectively combat this menace? Do our governments possess the political will to abolish human trafficking? Do our law enforcement agencies and legal mechanisms have the capacity, knowledge, and resources to combat the complexities

of trafficking? How can we all collaborate and initiate networks to be more effective in our efforts?”

Rev. Diana Tana, the Vice-Moderator of the CCA, chaired and facilitated the webinar.

Gaelle Demolis, of the UN Women Asia-Pacific office, presented the emerging trends and changing nature of human trafficking in Asia after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. She said that the Asian governments’ “security focus response” diverted the already-stretched resources of law enforcement officials at the borders and took their attention away from detecting cases of human trafficking. She highlighted the importance of women law enforcement officials at the border who play a crucial role in detecting cases of human trafficking, as they are the only ones who can perform body searches on women and listen to the women who risk becoming potential victims of trafficking.

“We must have good partnerships at the local level between grassroots women’s organisations and law enforcement agencies. We may not always be coordinated, but we must build on each other’s work and support each other in our own ways,” added the UN Women official.

Peppi Kiviniemi-Siddiq, of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), spoke of how the challenges of human trafficking were compounded under COVID-19. “The global recession and the decreasing opportunities for regular migration has created conducive conditions for exploitation and human trafficking. We need to start thinking of how to ramp up the identification of victims of trafficking and protection measures, and see where we can improve and how we can streamline assistance,” she said.

Ms Siddiq also explained that the uncoordinated opening and closing of borders would be deeply challenging for the future management of international and cross-border mobility, as well as for pre-existing visa and other immigration agreements between countries. “The confusion for migrants around what constitutes regular migration and legal crossing of borders will likely make them more willing to engage with agents for support, which again will make them more vulnerable to being trafficked. This will need a multisectoral, inclusive, and collaborative approach

that is clearly communicated to the migrant communities,” she explained.

In her presentation, Bandana Pattanaik, of the Global Alliance against Trafficking in Women (GAATW) focussed on the world of work and employment. She said that current realities pointed to the unravelling of the neoliberal economic paradigm and the failure of the extractivist model of growth and development.

“Exploitation is no longer ‘exceptional’. Precarity is now a given in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy; coupled with the lack of public services and social safety nets, we see cascading impacts, where the informal employment of women itself is generated within the spaces of precarity,” said Ms Pattanaik while explaining the intricacies of the different sectors of the economy. She added that under COVID-19, the ‘classic’ cases of trafficking were not observed, rather the emergence of contract violations, dysfunctional recruitment, workplace abuse, and delayed payments had all become gateways to human trafficking in Asia.

Rupa Pradhan Chetri, of the Mukti Network Nepal, shared the ground realities of the India-Nepal border, which is known as one of the busiest human trafficking gateways in the world. “The India-Nepal border is open and highly porous, that allows traffickers to function without being stopped or intercepted,” said Ms Chetri. She spoke of how the traffickers’ tactics of coercion had morphed, saying that the traffickers now relied on grooming of potential victims rather than direct physical intimidation. “Under the COVID-19 pandemic, we are hearing cases of how traffickers are providing paltry relief and aid to create a sense of obligation in the minds of their victims. This new form of exploitation and grooming allows traffickers to lure victims into jobs and then traffic them for labour.”

Ms Chetri also called upon churches and faith-based organisations to intervene and aid in the prevention of trafficking. “We are called to be the salt of the earth. This implies that we must step out of our churches and into the communities of vulnerable people. Traffickers lure their victims in convoluted ways. We must be creative and innovative in reaching out to potential victims and prevent them from being exploited,” she said.

Rev. Mariesol Villalon, who works in the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Ministry of the United Methodist Church in the Philippines, spoke specifically of her country's context, which has been termed "the global epicentre of the live-stream sexual abuse trade". "Images of naked and sexualised Filipino children are being uploaded, shared, and sold online. Filipino children are forced to do unspeakable acts in front of cameras and are ideal targets of predators and traffickers online. Poverty, cheap internet and smartphones, the ability to communicate well in English, the curtailing of means of family income, and the lack of parental supervision are all to be blamed for the sexual exploitation of Filipino children," she said.

"We must empower our children to speak out. Churches must popularise children's rights among the children and include it as core components in Christian education programmes. We must advocate for the responsible use of the internet and reiterate our prophetic ministry. This is a kairos moment to remind our congregations that each Filipino child and each Filipino woman is created in God's image," added Rev. Villalon.

Rev. Dr Lintje H. Pellu, of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), shared the law enforcement concerns and inadequacies of the Indonesian government in effectively combatting human trafficking in the archipelagic country. "Inconsistencies in implementation, minimal coordination, and poor budgeting continue to adversely impact the progress of the Indonesian government in tackling human trafficking. We must also consider how human trafficking victims are likely to be re-trafficked due to lack of permanent jobs and past debt traps, which is exacerbated for women and children who are considered commodities in patriarchal Indonesian society," she said.

Rev. Pellu advocated for the active participation of churches and faith-based organisations in partnering with key stakeholders and the promotion of the ratification of anti-human trafficking laws. "We must build ecumenical partnerships and relationships among organisations that work towards the same cause. The model of such partnership is multilateral and inclusive, and is expressed in the form of collective advocacy, public witness, networking, and dissemination of information," she explained.

The panellists also shared best practices from their local contexts and organisational experiences. They suggested strategies for joint and collaborative actions to combat the trafficking of women and girls in Asia. These included: the creation of training manuals to handle cases of trafficking from a gender- and victim-centred perspective; the strengthening of linkages between national counter-trafficking taskforces and civil society organisations; strategic and innovative community and political mobilisation for broader engagement; community awareness-building concerning legal mechanisms; reaching out to perpetrators; bearing down on transnational trafficking networks to break the demand-supply chain; and facilitating the economic empowerment of the vulnerable to prevent them from becoming victims of trafficking.

Rev. Diana Tana, in her concluding remarks, said, “The issue of human trafficking is overwhelming, and we have heard the anger and frustration along with the compassion and passion. Let us persist with our advocacy and mobilisation efforts, let us partner to develop strategies and eliminate trafficking, and let us continue to support and strengthen our communities and churches.”

Bringing together an expert group of panellists representing the UN and other international organisations, civil society organisations, as well as faith-based organisations, the CCA has provided a common platform to devise renewed forms of partnerships and collaborations for joint action against trafficking in women and girls.

# Impact of Growing Religious Extremism on Women in Asia

*15 December 2020*

## **Background and Context**

Most Asian countries, in recent times, have experienced different forms of religious extremism. The growing trend of religious extremism intensifies intolerance and conflicts, which bear a deep impact on the lives and rights of women. Almost every major religion justifies intolerance, oppression, and violence against women. Asia is home to all of the world's major religions and all of them coexisted in Asia for centuries. However, the situation of religious minorities in Asia in recent times has become increasingly complex, as such communities are subject to oppression and violation of rights. The denial of the rights of religious minorities in Asia includes limited access to education and employment opportunities, which leads to the perpetuation of poverty. When such acts take the form of intimidation and violence, they have threatening implications for religious minorities, for civil society, and human rights in general, and especially for women and other vulnerable groups within minorities.

A common feature among extremist ideologies is a strong tendency towards patriarchy. Women from minority religious or ethnic groups are more vulnerable to violence and face enormous challenges ranging from right to life, access to education, and access to justice. In Asia, women from minority groups have been victims of physical violence, sexual abuses, and rape, abduction, forced conversions and forced marriages as well as murder. The targeting of minority women is not accidental or 'collateral damage'; it is deliberate, tactical, and strategic. In many cases, religious extremists have warped religious identities, mixing religious and non-indigenous cultural practices in an attempt to control women's bodies and status. However, Asian women are persistent in raising their voices and challenging the spread of such criminal acts as well as deliberate attempts. Despite the threats they face and the closure of public space available to them, women's activism for basic rights continues locally, nationally, and globally.



Christian Conference of Asia

Virtual Conference



## IMPACT OF GROWING RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM ON WOMEN IN ASIA

Tuesday 15 December 2020  
12.00 Noon - 14.00 Hrs., Bangkok Time



Mathews George Chunakara  
CCA



Basil Fernando  
AHRG



Asiya Nasir  
Pakistan



Sarasu Esther Thomas  
India



Lesli Davis  
U.N. Women



Nandita Biswas  
Bangladesh



Amirah Lidasan  
The Philippines



Dwi Rubiyanti Kholifah  
Indonesia

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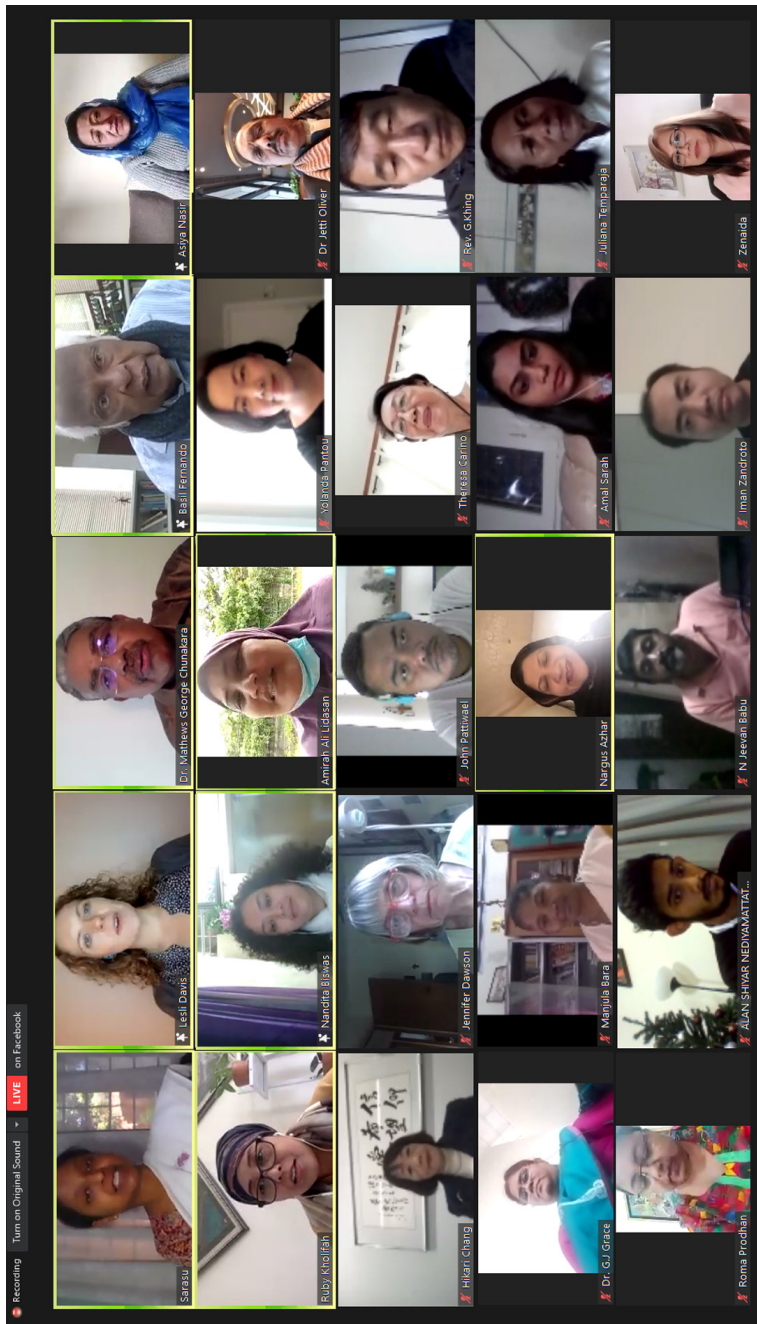
[www.cca.org.hk](http://www.cca.org.hk)

The webinar aimed to analyse the causes of growing religious intolerance and extremism and its deep socio-economic impacts on the status of women in different countries in Asia; deliberate on the growing trend of violence against women and girls from religious and ethnic minorities and find ways to combat such inhuman and cruel acts; and strategize for collect action of all sections in society, including churches and FBOs, to advocate for the protection of women from marginalised groups.

### ***Panellists***

#### ***Moderator***

- **Dr Mathews George Chunakara**  
*General Secretary, CCA*
- **Lesli Davis**  
*Governance, Peace, and Security Analyst, UN Women Asia-Pacific*
- **Basil Fernando**  
*Director, Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Hong Kong*
- **Prof. Dr Sarasu Esther Thomas**  
*Registrar, National Law School University, India*
- **Asiya Nasir**  
*Chairperson, Pakistan Christian Forum, and former Parliamentarian, Pakistan*
- **Dwi Rubiyanti Kholifah**  
*Country Director, Asian Muslim Action Network, Indonesia*
- **Amirah Ali Lidasan**  
*General Secretary, Moro Christian People's Alliance, and Spokesperson, Suara Bangsamoro, Philippines*
- **Nandita Biswas**  
*Youth Secretary, National Council of Churches in Bangladesh*



## Webinar Report

The virtual conference on ‘The Impact of Growing Religious Extremism on Women in Asia’ observed, “The menace of religious extremism and intolerance has once again reared its ugly head as extremist and fundamentalist groups create dangerous fault-lines within communities in Asia.”

The panellists representing the United Nations (UN), the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), as well as leading human rights defenders, activists, and academicians from different countries further opined, “In recent times, there have been severe affronts to the wellbeing and dignity of religious minorities in many Asian countries, where violence and discrimination have been justified in the name of ‘protecting’ certain religious tenets. A strong tendency towards patriarchy is dominant in extremism, irrespective of the religion.”

The panellists elucidated examples of how women from minority groups in different Asian countries have been victims of physical violence, sexual violence, psychological abuse, abductions, forced conversions and marriages, and honour killings.

“Paradigm shifts in the meaning and performance of femininities and masculinities are key to transforming religious communities into strongholds of peace and harmony. To combat violence against women wrought by religious extremism, it is necessary to articulate and challenge the patriarchy inherent in such ideologies. Protecting and promoting the wellbeing of women will entail collaborations and partnerships of governments, civil society organisations, and faith communities,” affirmed the expert group of panellists at the eighth virtual conference.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, the General Secretary of the CCA, was the moderator of the webinar.

“The increasing inclinations towards religious extremism and violence in the Asian context is a critical issue. Although the constitutions of almost every Asian country emphasise the equality of men and women, there exists a great chasm between theory and practice. The relationships between men and women

within communities are governed not by laws but by systematic subordination, all-pervasive patriarchy, and economic disparities. The rise of extremist movements is creating dangerous fault-lines within communities, with terrible implications for women,” said the CCA General Secretary in his opening address, wherein he outlined the necessity and urgency of the proposed theme. Dr Mathews George also added that extremism was not a feature inherent to any particular religion itself, but could be seen in all religions where certain tenets or principles were distorted or manipulated. He said that such distortions were used to justify the ill-treatment of women and that doing so only intensified intolerance and violence.

Lesli Davis, a Governance, Peace, and Security specialist from the UN Women Asia Pacific Regional Office shared insights from the research undertaken by the organisation on violent extremism.

Ms Davis said that regional trends demonstrated how extremist ideologies were often underpinned by gender stereotypes and that core values of extremist groups included “specific and rigid ideas about what it meant to be a man or woman, and how this masculinity or femininity was to be exercised.” She also said that extremist leaders exhibited a proclivity to patriarchy, maintaining the male-dominated status quo in society, and curtailing women’s rights in the process.

Ms Davis reported that extremists used stereotypical gender roles to recruit men and women who were ‘threatened’ by the norms of equality in the larger society. Restrictions on the movement, appearance, and reproductive rights of women were imposed by men who claimed to take on the roles of ‘protectors’ and ‘enforcers’. The second trend observed in the region was the close linkages between misogyny, the fear or hatred of women, and extremism and violence. Qualitative research had shown that those who espoused sexist attitudes were most likely to support violence as well. This bore worrying implications, as the third trend showed a recent spike in the volume of, and interest in, online misogynistic content, especially among young men.

The UN Women official further stated, “Women’s empowerment itself is a preventive factor against extremism; when societies are more gender-equal, they are more peaceful.” She noted that

although women were influential drivers of change in their own communities, they needed support, platforms, solidarity, and advocacy to push back on the threat to their rights.

She called for initiatives to harness the potential of the youth—empowering young women in religious congregations to lead and set the agenda and engaging young male champions to embody positive masculinity and end violence. “Give men alternate ways to express their identity and power; help them make the transition from hegemonic masculinity to positive masculinity via advocacy and role modelling,” she concluded.

Basil Fernando, a prominent Asian human rights defender and Director of the AHRC spoke of the need to “transform the articulation of the law into the implementation of the law.”

He observed, “Law without law enforcement capacities is even more damaging to the wellbeing of women,” and pointed out the differences in the human rights narratives of developed and developing countries, calling for stronger institutions and protections.

“Religion is about love, compassion, and embracing the other. Violence, the antithesis of religion, is perpetrated under its pretext,” he explained, adding that the causes of this violence included territorial expansions, petty political advantages, or unfair competition.

Mr Fernando further stated, “True empowerment is in deeds, not in words. Empowerment implies fighting against practical obstacles—it means training volunteers on the ground, helping women victims, reporting, and monitoring of courts, police, and prosecutors. Therein lay the difference between surface activism and in-depth activism,” he said.

The prominent Asian human rights defender also called the attention of the participants to the manner in which communication networks and the media, the fourth pillar of democracy, were being misused for nefarious purposes. He said that the mainstream media had deprived genuine voices and had “infiltrated our homes,” inundating people with news and ideas that diverted attention from critical issues. “Use communication

networks to talk about actual problems, about what really happens when you go to protect your rights. Only then can public opinion be influenced,” Mr Fernando told the participants.

Prof. Dr Sarasu Esther Thomas, the Registrar of the National Law School University in India, said it was vital to remember that women were first and foremost oppressed by their own communities.

She spoke of the oppression of women under Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) and shared five major stereotypes that impacted women in India. These included—the assumption that women were “tricked” into converting into a minority faith and the subsequent denial of their agency; that minority men “lured” majority women into marriages to convert them; that the values of the majority were being threatened and needed to be protected at all costs; that women from marginalised groups obscured and lied about heinous crimes against them; and that minority women needed to be protected from the men in their own communities.

Dr Thomas also observed that the current pandemic context had increased the vulnerabilities and repercussions faced by women in India. She said that there was a visible increase in the number of child marriages being reported as well as a rise in the number of forced or arranged marriages along with the prevention of genuine and consensual marriages. “Given the falling sex ratios in the country, women are being treated as ‘scarce’ commodities in some communities. They are being policed to ensure they do not ‘defect’ to other communities in the form of marriage,” said the eminent academician and family law expert from India.

When sharing her suggestions for the way ahead, Dr Thomas said that there was danger in resorting to a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model. She emphasised that any form of redress had to be designed keeping in mind the intersectionalities and identities of women from different communities. She also called upon all to foster a “human rights culture” that was founded on education, awareness, and reform.

Asiya Nasir, a former Member of Parliament in Pakistan and currently the Chairperson of the Pakistan Christian Forum, spoke

of the worrisome status of women in her country. She highlighted the contradictions inherent in the Constitution itself—while on the one hand, it claimed men and women were equal before the law, it, on the other hand, said that only a Muslim man could be the Prime Minister/President/or hold other key positions. Thus, she asked, how equality could be guaranteed when discrimination was enshrined in the Constitution.

The seasoned politician and human rights activist lamented the loopholes in the implementation of protection mechanisms. Although mandated by the highest court in the land, they were often poorly executed. She said that minority women, especially Christian women, suffered discrimination both externally and within their own communities. “Women are considered soft and easy targets; often subject to forced conversions and forced marriages. As perpetrators enjoy impunity under the law, they get away with victimising minor girls under the age of 15,” she reported.

Ms Nasir highlighted the reluctance of different Christian congregations within the country to come to a common consensus and to ensure the legal protection of their women. “Our religious leaders must come forward and fulfil their responsibilities in responding to the pressing needs of the women in their congregation. It is critical for churches to affirm the dignity of all women and also to ensure the protection of the youngest in our midst,” she said. She also called upon the UN to take affirmative action and review their policies, especially those pertaining to the forced conversion and marriage of women.

Dwi Rubiyanti Kholifah, the Country Director of the Asian Muslim Action Network in Indonesia, said that growing intolerance provided “fertile ground for extremism” with grave consequences for harmony if not immediately addressed. She said that false notions of superiority and disagreements over differences shrunk the space for exchange learning and prevented beneficial dialogue.

“The belief in the exclusivity of one’s own ‘truth’, coupled with the misogynistic interpretation of the role of women and demeaning propaganda against women’s rights and feminism hinders efforts to tackle gender-based violence, prevents the

public participation of women, and undermines the dignity of women in every manner possible,” was how this writer and human rights champion emphatically put it. She called for a shift in the perception of extremism to understand why people were drawn to such discriminatory ideologies.

From the interfaith perspective, Ms Kholifah shared examples of empowerment within the Indonesian Shia Muslim community. “Compared to other faith minorities, the Shia community has low rates of women leadership and also low literacy. This was addressed at the very grassroots through programmes aimed at teaching women to read, write, and understand their situation and rights, by showing them the importance of not easily signing documents that could be detrimental to their wellbeing and by facilitating their employment,” she explained.

Amirah Ali Lidasan, a Moro leader and General Secretary of the Moro Christian People’s Alliance and spokesperson for Suara Bangsamoro, explained the causes and consequences of the resurgence of extremism in the Mindanao region in Southern Philippines. She said that inconsistencies in the interpretations of Islam led to certain strands of extremism. She also explained the power of the community, saying that the majority in the Muslim community did not recognise such extremist views but valued a harmonious history of coexistence with other faith communities in the region.

The spirited activist also highlighted the damage wrought by the combative and unwarranted military heavy-handedness of the government. Although the country was a signatory to various agreements and charters that affirmed all human rights, the defensive actions of the government against its own citizens had caused further polarisation and divides in society, with women being caught in the crossfire.

Nandita Biswas, the Youth Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Bangladesh, shared the daily reality of discrimination faced by the women in her country. She said that although the government had adopted a variety of initiatives and had passed significant legislation to address violence against women and girls, the socio-cultural milieu in the country was still acutely shaped by the doctrines of the majority religion. As a result,

she reported that there were significant gaps in enforcement, coordination, and awareness.

The young women's rights activist also shared the social pressure on women that led to underreporting of instances of violence. The politicisation of religion and the 'religionisation' of politics had undermined all efforts to protect the interests and wellbeing of women. The imposition of a slew of religious practices was aimed at curtailing the autonomy of women and aggravated intolerance among communities.

A liaison member of the Christian Personal Law Amendment committee on the Bangladesh Law Commission, Ms Biswas stressed the need for increased attention to the education and social uplift of Bangladeshi women. "Laws alone cannot communicate ethics and norms, or erase the prevailing misogynistic social order. Collaborations among the government, religious organisations, women's groups, and other movements are critical to challenge existing beliefs and behaviours and to reinforce the equality and inherent worth of all women," she said.

In his closing remarks, Dr Mathews George Chunakara said that the webinar offered key insights into the overlapping complexities faced by Asian women in their daily lives. He emphasised the need for developing a human rights culture in addressing the issues related to growing religious extremism and violence against women and affirmed the need for stronger linkages and networks to ameliorate the plight of women in the region. "The CCA will continue to engage its constituencies in addressing gross violations of the rights of women and combat growing religious hatred and intolerance," the CCA General Secretary concluded.

# Abbreviations

AANDRoC	Asian Advocacy Network on Dignity and Rights of Children
ACT	Alliance for Conflict Transformation (Cambodia)
AHRC	Asian Human Rights Commission
ARI	Asian Rural Institute (Japan)
CASA	Churches' Auxiliary for Social Action (India)
CCA	Christian Conference of Asia
CCDB	Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh
CCH	Christian Coalition for Health (India)
CCI	Communion of Churches in Indonesia
CCT	Church of Christ in Thailand
CDS	Centre for Development Studies (India)
CMAI	Christian Medical Association in India
COVID-19	The novel coronavirus disease first identified in China in 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FABC	Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences
FBO	Faith-based Organisation
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
MAP	Migrant Assistance Programme (Thailand)
NCCA	National Council of Churches in Australia
NCCI	National Council of Churches in India
NCCK	National Council of Churches in Korea

NCCP	National Council of Churches in the Philippines
NCCSL	National Council of Churches in Sri Lanka
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PCK	Presbyterian Church in Japan
PCT	Presbyterian Church in Taiwan
PELKESI	Persekutuan Pelayanan Kristen untuk Kesehatan di Indonesia (Indonesian Christian Association of Health Services)
PGI	Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia (see: CCI)
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RST	Regional Support Team (used to describe UN offices)
SAHR	South Asians for Human Rights (Sri Lanka)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UCCJ	United Church of Christ in Japan
UCCP	United Church of Christ in the Philippines
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Commission
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund (formerly, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association



“The Christian Conference of Asia's webinar series covered a wide range of issues related to the pandemic and served as a forum to share emerging challenges and develop insights and solutions together. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to take its toll in various forms, from taking the lives of thousands to decimating whole economies, the CCA tried to engage its member churches and councils, as well as related organisations, faith based communities, non-governmental and inter- governmental organisations, including the United Nations, in responding to the crisis. It is heartening that the discernments and good practices shared during the webinars are worth emulating and responding to the situations in order to instil hope amidst despair and anxiety.”

**Mathews George Chunakara**  
General Secretary, CCA



**Christian Conference of Asia**

Payap University, Muang, Chiang Mai 50000 Thailand  
Tel: +66-(0)53-243906, 243907 Fax: +66-(0)53-247303

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