

# SAIEVAC Interfaith Platform Meeting Fostering Engagement with Faith Actors to End Violence Against

Organized by SAIEVAC Regional Secretariat In Partnership with the SAIEVAC Interfaith Think Tank (IPPF, WVI & ECPAT)

**Bangkok, Mar 15, 2019** ([IssueWire.com](http://IssueWire.com)) - Distinguished faith actors, civil society organizations and government representatives from SAARC countries came together for a two-day Interfaith Platform Meeting in Bangkok, Thailand. The platform paved the way for discussing strategies to involve faith actors in creating safe spaces and supporting environment essential to eliminate violence against children. The meeting was jointly hosted by South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC) in partnership with IPPF SARO, World Vision International Asia Pacific, and End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT) International. The aim of the meeting was to develop the roadmap and mechanisms to engage with faith-based actors and institutions for ending child marriage, sexual exploitation and child abuse.

Religious and faith leaders are often best placed to advocate for social and legal change. They can be strong advocates for policies and laws, change behaviors and social norms, shifting harmful practices to positive actions that promote the dignity and respect of all children.

Key representatives, who shared their views on the subject included Rishfa Rasheed (Director, Social Affairs, SAARC), Dr. Wanchai Rounjanavong (Representative of Thailand to ASEAN Commission for Women and Children), Dr. Rinchen Chopel (Director General, SAIEVAC), Lama Sherab Dorji (Child Protection Officer, Central Monastic Body of Bhutan), Akmal Shareef, (Country Director – India and Bangladesh, Islamic Relief), Dr. Richa Chopra (Senior Art of Living Teacher), Deepesh Paul Thakur (Director, Advocacy and Justice for Children, World Vision International, Asia Pacific Region), Ajit Hazra (Director, Faith and Development, World Vision International, South Asia & Pacific Region) and Shrinkhala Thapa (Regional Coordinator, ECPAT South Asia), Syed Kamal Shah (Regional Director, IPPF SARO) and Neha Chauhan (Senior Technical Advisor – Advocacy and Accountability, IPPF).

The participants emphasized that faith-based institutions have a unique and essential role as a change agent primarily because of their inherent influence on social norms and behavior. Given the pivotal role that faith-based leaders play in the socio-cultural ecosystem of the South Asia region, it is of significant value to engage and work together to create a strong social movement to safeguard children from harm and exploitation.

Several successful models implemented in partnership with faith actors were also presented during the meeting. IPPF SARO Regional Director, Syed Kamal Shah highlighted that the adolescent health programmes in the Islamic schools of Bangladesh and initiatives against the practice of Swara in Pakistan should be examples for other religious leaders and organizations to follow. Ajit Hazra from World Vision spoke about successful models such as the Children's Forum for Community Development in Sri Lanka and church & temple working together in Thailand to address the issue. The collaborative work of leaders from different faith traditions in Nepal towards addressing the issue related to violence against children in their communities was also highlighted. Lama Sherab Dorji, Child Protection Officer at the Central Monastic Body of Bhutan spoke about strengthening the child protection system within the monastic and other religious institutions in the country with interventions like training of teachers and students. A representative from the Islamic Relief Organisation spoke about the training of faith leaders on child protection issues like trafficking, especially in Bihar and Nepal. Dr. Ruchi Chopra spoke about The Faith in Action summit, held at the Art of Living International Center,

which was attended by over 300 religious leaders across faith and states with strong representation and participation from people living with HIV (PLHIV). The objective of the summit was sensitization of religious leaders across faith on stigmatization and role of faith-based organizations in addressing the issue. These dialogues reinforced on how faith-based leaders can play a catalytic role in challenging traditional harmful practices against children by interpreting scriptures and religious teaching in the light of children's human rights.

The formation of SAIEVAC Interfaith Regional Platform is a strategic step for joint action with faith actors and faith institutions to end violence against children in SAARC countries.

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