

Asia Pacific *Family Dialogue*

The Australian Institute of Family Studies was pleased to be invited to participate in the *Asia Pacific Family Dialogue* hosted by the Government of Malaysia, and to chair a session and facilitate a roundtable discussion. This article presents the reflections on the conference of the Institute's participants, **RUTH WESTON** (who also represented the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services), and **GRACE SORIANO**.

Several significant events worldwide have been undertaken to mark the tenth anniversary of the United Nations 1994 International Year of the Family. One vital activity within the Region was the *East Asian Ministerial Forum on Families* held in Hanoi in April 2004. This Forum was discussed by Ruth Weston in the previous edition of *Family Matters* (no. 68, Winter 2004, pp.60-67).

More recently, the government of Malaysia hosted the *Asia-Pacific Family Dialogue* in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 11-13 October 2004.

The Asia Pacific Family Dialogue was the final in a series of four Regional Dialogues, leading up to an international conference on the family held in Doha, Qatar, on 29-30 November 2004, as agreed upon at the United Nations General Assembly in December 2003. The other three gatherings took place in Mexico City, Stockholm, and Geneva. Reports from these Dialogues will be submitted to the Doha conference.

The ultimate aim of this entire process is to provide recommendations to "strengthen and fortify the natural and fundamental group unit of society", as embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 16(3)).

The Dialogue was hosted by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (through the National Population and Family Development Board), in conjunction with the World Policy Centre, Brigham Young University, Utah. It was attended by 800 participants from a variety of countries, cultures

and religions who were drawn together by their commitment to share, learn and discuss ways and means to ensure that, across all key domains, families are strengthened, not weakened. More than 70 papers were presented by speakers from 20 countries, including Australia and New Zealand. In addition, roundtable discussions were held on such issues as marriage, parents and children, family life, family values, and families and government policies. Together the papers and discussions underscored several areas of divergence and convergence in perspectives within and between cultures.

Diverging perspectives

The Dialogue stimulated a great deal of lively discussion, sometimes more passionate than perhaps the speakers expected. For instance, one speaker from the United States identified feminism as a



Ruth Weston (centre) facilitated a roundtable discussion on marriage involving representatives from Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Mexico and the United States.



force that undermines marriages. This drew a strong reaction from some representatives of women's movements in Malaysia who were fighting for gender equity within marriage, which they considered to be an essential weapon against family violence. While several speakers focused on the notion of gender disparity disadvantaging women, others referred to ways in which differences in the traditional family roles of men and women can complement each other and promote family harmony. In addition, while divorce was often seen as undermining personal wellbeing, it was also argued that the impact of divorce on children is not necessarily negative and can be positive.

An example of a unique cultural experience, discussed by Huidi and Lui, concerned the social problems emerging from China's one-child policy. These included: loss of support for the elderly; the high illiteracy among children in larger families in rural areas (who will make up the bulk of the

future labour force); imbalance in the sex-ratio; massive and continuing migration to urban areas separating parents from spouses and children, and children from grandparents who would otherwise look after them while their parents worked; poor housing conditions for these migrants; and new forms of class antagonism and discrimination. The authors also argued that "only children" growing up in cities tended to be spoiled and were more likely to reject marriage and parenthood, or opt for later marriage and delayed childbirth.

Such diversity of views and experiences presented over the three days highlighted the varied challenges

confronting families in different cultures. Participants thus left the conference with much to think about.

Converging perspectives

While the papers underscored cultural differences in the nature or prevalence of certain difficulties facing families, much commonality also emerged. This was well encapsulated in the plenary paper by the Hon. Datuk G. Palanivel, (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia) who pointed out that, regardless of culture and family size and structure, the ultimate challenge is to ensure that one's family is the "number one" priority in life. He emphasised the importance of all communities working together to support the formation and strengthening of families and outlined his government's policies and programs directed towards the development of a progressive, prosperous and resilient nation of citizens who not only possess suitable knowledge and skills but are also ethical, tolerant and caring.

This paper highlighted the importance of the family as the basic unit of society and its entitlement for protection – issues that were emphasised and supported throughout the conference. Strategies to promote and strengthen marriage were thus seen as important for the health of families, communities, nations, regions, and the world as a whole.

Another area of similarity across cultures, suggested by Dr Huang Wei-Jen, a Clinical Psychologist from Northwestern University in the United States, concerned the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping the quality of adult relationships. To Dr Huang Wei-Jen, the attachment styles displayed in childhood are pivotal to the way an individual deals with relationships in adulthood. Nevertheless, he also argued that those who have had painful experiences in childhood that impinge on their capacity to sustain satisfactory adult relationships can overcome their relationship difficulties. He



Participants in the roundtable discussion on work and family issues. From left: Nizam Zakaria (Attorney General's Chambers, Malaysia); Jessyln Woo (ET Lim and Partners); Dolly Foo (Flexxi, Malaysia); Grace Soriano (Australian Institute of Family Studies); Mrs Wong (President of the Association of Registered Childcare Providers, Malaysia); and the discussion facilitator Mrs Tan Hwee See (Coordinating Director, Family Development, Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore).



Grace Soriano and Ruth Weston chat with Ms Fatimah Saad, Director General of the National Population and Family Development Board which organised the Dialogue. The Director General was presented with the latest copy of *Family Matters* and the Institute's Annual Report.



International delegates with key officials from the Malaysian government including YB Dato' Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development (front row centre) who delivered both the welcome and closing address at the Dialogue.

identified three “keys to love” – knowing how to manage interpersonal differences and conflicts, intentionally strengthening friendships, and nurturing a healthy true self – and drew on past research to outline some effective strategies used to strengthen relationships.

A third example of cross-cultural commonality concerned the difficulties in balancing work and family life. Associate Professor Graeme Russell (Macquarie University, Australia) highlighted several demographic changes in the workforce that call for innovative policies and practices to address both business and employee needs, including the increasing number of mothers with young children entering the labour market, dual career families, an ageing workforce, a shortage of talent in many industries, and increased need for technical skill.

Russell argued that failure to address issues concerning the balance of work and family life has several negative outcomes. For instance, it contributes to an increase in stress and reduction in physical and emotional wellbeing; it has a negative impact on the quality of parenting and family relationships; and it results in increased absenteeism, reduced levels of work and teamwork effectiveness; and increased staff turnover. On the other hand, Russell provided evidence suggesting that the implementation of policies such as paid and unpaid parental leave, flexible hours, the ability to work from home and leave entitlements result in a return on investment and, where relevant, customer retention. Nevertheless, he noted that “one size does not fit all” – effective work–family life strategies vary across organisations and often within organisations.



Delegates were treated to a song and dance presentation by children dressed in costumes of various countries to depict unity and harmony amongst Asia-Pacific countries despite the diversity in cultures.

The increasing need for family-friendly work policies outlined by Russell was taken up by others and seen as one of the problems emerging from modernisation and globalisation. Other issues linked with these processes, identified by speakers from various countries, included decreases in fertility rates; delays in marriage; increasing urbanisation and internal and international migration which often split families; and the ageing of the population. In the area of ageing, ASEAN countries were seen as facing multiple difficulties because this process is occurring in the context of relatively low levels of economic development. Considerable concern was expressed at the Dialogue about whether traditional support for the elderly would erode in the future.

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Family

The three days of discussion culminated in the development of the *Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Family*, a document that will be submitted to *The Doha International Conference* (November 2004). The Declaration embodied the strong commitment of the organisers and participants to ensure the promotion of family wellbeing across all domains. One set of strategies, outlined in the Declaration for achieving this objective, was the promotion and funding of research relating to family life, the monitoring and evaluation of family-related policies and programmes, and the collaboration and sharing of research findings and best practice models.

With more than 70 papers presented at this conference, this brief discussion has necessarily been highly selective. Despite the differences in views about forces that undermine or promote family stability and wellbeing, participants at the Dialogue acknowledged that the importance of the family transcends cultural, religious and political boundaries. They appeared to be united in their commitment to ensure that the family is protected and promoted.

But what do we mean by “family protection and promotion”? While continuing changes in family life and values are inevitable, as Professor Gavin Jones aptly noted: “The challenge for policy is to assist in maintaining those features that are judged to be desirable in the 21st century, and not to mourn the passing of features that have only ‘tradition’ to justify them”.

Ruth Weston and Grace Soriano are researchers at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Copies of papers presented at the Dialogue are available from the Institute’s Family Information Centre.