

Gender Equality Empowerment For All

A Dialogue to Action Toolkit

Religions *for* Peace
UK WOMEN OF FAITH NETWORK

Different Faiths, Common Action

THE RELIGIONS FOR PEACE UK STORY

Religions for Peace United Kingdom is a charitable organisation, we are the independent UK Chapter of Religions for Peace International (www.rfp.org) an entity accredited to the United Nations. It is a global multi-religious coalition which has been guided by the vision of a world in which religious communities cooperate effectively for peace since 1970.

We are participating in the global mission to go beyond dialogue, which bears fruit in common action with communities of faith and society at large. At the moment our work involves peace education, climate change, inner peace exploration, and refugee integration.

We share this work with our UK Women of Faith Network and UK Interfaith Youth Network. Together we take forward the strategy to build and strengthen representative, sustainable interreligious mechanisms, to link local, national, regional and global multi-religious structures and forge partnerships with other sectors of society.

RELIGIONS FOR PEACE UK WOMEN OF FAITH NETWORK

The Global Religions for Peace movement affirms that all human beings are equal in dignity and rights, and recognises that women of faith leaders are irreplaceable and co-equal partners in peace-building. Peace-building begins with personal transformation, which culminates in peaceful, just and harmonious societies.

The UK Women of Faith Network (UKWFN) brings together diverse women of faith and interfaith-based women's organisations in the UK to work together for peace. The Network further seeks to amplify the leadership role of women of faith and to equip women leaders to advance the RfP mission. The mission to achieve transformation to some of the world's most urgent challenges– preventing conflict, overcoming gender-based violence, addressing leadership of women and securing/protecting the environment for future generations.

UKWFN is committed to working together for improved community relations, gender empowerment and a peaceful and harmonious United Kingdom. Through inter-faith dialogue and multi-religious action, we will work together cooperatively for the common good.

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Foreword from the Chair of Religions for Peace UK

Cinde Lee

Dear Brothers and Sisters

It is with great excitement that I am writing this foreword to the Gender Equality Empowerment for All Toolkit.

This is the culmination of major projects the UK Women of Faith Network has undertaken in the past years. Our projects also show the wisdom and commitment of those who have been part of this work, be they speakers, contributors, participants, coordinators, facilitators, staff or volunteers.

The "Dignity of Women", "Women from Religious Scriptures", "16 Day of Activism against Gender-based Violence" and "Let Earth Breathe" projects have taken place over virtual as well as face-to-face formats. These encounters have enabled UKWFN a wider reach into England, Scotland and Wales. We have partnered with faith actors, practitioners, scholars, government officials and asked significant questions and received thoughtful answers. We have reached across faiths and beliefs, and now we have consolidated our experience, with the help from experts and laymen alike, we present to you the Gender Equality Empowerment for All Toolkit.



The Toolkit will assist those who wish to take forward these issues in their communities. We are hoping each potential user of the Toolkit can utilise our material, take reference from our method, create an operating model according to their circumstances, and engage their community to tackle the various issues which many will find important to address.

As well as acknowledging the contribution of each and every participant of our past events, I would like to show appreciation to the members of the Coordinating Committee of UKWFN- for their input into the Toolkit. We are indebted to Jenny Ramsden for her tireless efforts for taking forward our many projects and compiling this Toolkit. None of this would have been possible without the guidance and diligence from Ravinder Kaur Nijjar, Chair of the UKWFN. Her vision to initiate and her extraordinary effort to bring a plethora of issues to the fore in an interconnected approach has given rise to the programmes and now made this Toolkit possible. RfPUK is in much debt to Ravinder for her steadfast strength and dedication to the global Religions for Peace movement, both in the UK and in the European and international platforms.

We hope this Toolkit can reach faith and belief communities far and wide, and going forward we are hoping to be able to support and work with those who take on the task to venture forth and strengthen themselves as leaders and allies, in their own communities, as well as the society at large.

We welcome a future where different faiths come together for common action, and I truly believe our concerted efforts will allow us to weave a rich tapestry of peace and concord, where all can see that "Standing Together, We are Stronger".

Introduction from the Chair of UK Women of Faith Network

Ravinder Kaur Nijjar

Dear Esteemed Colleagues and Friends

It is with great pleasure that UK Women of Faith Network (UKWFN) is delighted to present the Gender Equality Empowerment for All Toolkit that can be used by faith, interfaith, secular communities/groups, and educational/governmental sectors.

Throughout the centuries the potential of women to transform society has been overlooked and history shows that women in all parts of the world have been considered inferior. It is hoped that the Toolkit will be used to empower women. To empower is to make someone stronger and more confident, particularly in controlling their life and claiming their rights. In a truly equal society, every woman should have the opportunity to reach her potential spiritually, religiously, educationally, and physically without encountering gender-related barriers.

The Toolkit can be used as a starting point to empower women:

- through education
- through spiritual wisdom by accessing the knowledge in religious scriptures
- to challenge misuse of scripture
- to take action and promote just and peaceful communities
- to raise awareness of the impact of climate change on women
- through prayer/meditation for personal peace
- through stories of inspirational women from past and present

To be empowered, women and girls must be able to read and write, therefore access to education is essential. Only then they can learn of the spiritual wisdom and knowledge in their religious scriptures, challenge those who misuse scriptures.

Through prayer/meditation, women may find personal peace and take action to promote peaceful societies by sharing knowledge to build trust and friendships between communities. The climate crisis in the 21st century has added to the challenges faced by women and girls, leading to further inequalities. Women must be part of the decision-making of policies and help to find solutions to protect the environment.

Throughout the ages it has been the practice to eulogise the achievements of men, but very rarely has there been any acknowledgement of the contribution of women. Sharing stories of inspirational women of faith from the past and present will give the role models of women in leadership.

It is hoped that the Toolkit, through dialogue and sharing of knowledge, will empower all to take action, to become confident and successful in challenging the inequalities in society within their families, their communities, their neighbourhoods nationally and internationally.



Motivating collaboration between faith, belief, and secular communities

UKWFN has had the privilege to work with numerous women's organisations in the UK and abroad. Many of our partners are faith or interfaith based communities. Since most of these organisations depend on their own means of funding it is often not easy to find funds for running a project nor a sustainable source for core and staff costs.

To smaller and more remotely located groups, face-to-face events carry substantial costs, and it is often the case that projects fail to materialise not because of lack of interest or shortage of enthusiasm, but due to restrictive resources and physical distance. This limitation changed with COVID 19, and UKWFN has gained much experience in the past 3 years in shaping and developing projects that reached substantial audiences. We are equipped with working online and face-to-face, attracting audiences worldwide, and we have gained experience with online communication, and this will be a game-changing element in our future endeavour.

As you will see in the individual workshop modules, a germinating idea can become a project, a series of undertakings, and a fully-fledged programme. This Toolkit can be used for online, in-person, and hybrid formats, we share with you our methods, our processes and our outcomes for your reference. The workshops are suitable for large or small gatherings. UKWFN is prepared to work with you and your communities, to go beyond listening to others, and to actively engage, collaborate, help with starting projects, plans of action.

Empowerment refers to leaders as well as to supporters. While leaders hone their practical skills, supporters awaken their drive to become actors, together they are the substance of any movement. UKWFN wishes to empower people of faith and belief to take on issues that affect communities locally and nationally by working together, by understanding and appreciating our common interests and concerns. Let us work together for peace that we know we all yearn for, let us build our potential projects together, give colour, texture and dimension to our endeavour, where all will become a part of the solution that makes the world a better place now and in the future.



Sharing our experience

At the onset of COVID 19 lockdown from 2020, the UK Women of Faith Network encountered challenges like any other organisations in the charity sector as most of our projects were designed to be face-to-face events. What we thought would bring catastrophic impact on our work actually became an opportunity to explore new methods of delivering projects. The sudden challenges of social distancing propelled us to move our work online, thus opening up possibilities of wider catchment of audiences. It did not take long for us to realise the alternative methods geared us towards making better decisions for overall results in more cost-effective ways.

We made advances in contacting, engaging, motivating and supporting women of faith, bringing our key priorities to discussion and action. We have traversed and consolidated issues we have tackled in the past, broke new grounds engaging people we have known, but not yet had the opportunity to collaborate with.

This widening of horizon was the impetus of the compilation of this Toolkit: we wish to recount our experiences, the methods used, showcasing our partners and share our results. We hope by sharing our project structure and methodology that our network partners can take projects forward in their respective communities and places of worship.

As we have increasingly opened up to face-to-face events, we are returning to "normal" with a broader reach, and the hybrid way of life is now the new norm for our future. Many organisations without substantial funding and resources can take on worthwhile causes and through this Toolkit we hope we can be instrumental in supporting your endeavour.

EXHIBITION & DISCUSSION SESSION

Dignity of Women

CONTEXT

"It is when women are unquestionably honoured and cherished that we truly appreciate Creation in its totality. The world can only be whole when we hold our females in respect and reverence." Cinde Lee, Chair, RfPUK

Spearheaded by the European Women of Faith Network, the Dignity of Women – Scriptural Reflections exhibition was launched in Sarajevo. The exhibition was aimed at bringing enhanced religious literacy to multi-faith audiences as well as women and girls who do not have easy access to their own scriptures. UKWFN has continued this work ever since. We realise the importance of this work, as one participant in this project stated, "Knowledge is power".

In our Dignity of Women exhibition, we cite positive references on the status of women from sacred scriptures of the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian religions.

Many do not realise such texts exist and are read widely among the faithful, UKWFN has been taking the exhibition to audiences in England, Scotland and Wales, and the discussions that took place gave us much insight into the issue of "Dignity".

The concept of Dignity is enshrined in the Human Rights Declaration. Article 1 states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." All people deserve honour and respect.

In Article 26, the Declaration states that, "Education shall be directed to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms". Through access to education, women and girls can learn what their sacred scriptures teach about the positive status of women; and are then able to use this knowledge to challenge and overcome forms of discrimination against them.

aims:

1 *To educate and empower religious and secular communities about what various sacred scriptures say about the value, contribution and dignity of women.*

2 *To promote interfaith dialogue and to facilitate understanding between faith/belief communities on the positive status of women.*

3 *To challenge, find ways to address, and share experiences to overcome any form of discrimination against women.*

THE UKWEN EXPERIENCE

We have hosted numerous events on this topic. We would like to describe our events and share with you what we have found helpful.

Sessions included discussions and dialogue. You may adapt our steps and questions according to your specific context and the time you have available.

1 The facilitator will introduce and lead the session using the context information.
2 Allow 15-20 minutes for participants to view the exhibition.
3 Participants can work in pairs or small groups for 20-minute discussions on the following:
3.1 Discuss your choice of a verse from the exhibition that inspired you.
3.2 Compare the connectiveness of the verses concerning the positive status of women.
3.3 What barriers do women still face in reaching their full potential and achieving equal status in their communities/society.
3.4 How can these barriers be addressed and overcome.
3.5 Name one practical action you will take in your home/community/workplace as a result of participating in this session.
4 The facilitator will ask for feedback from small groups and encourage discussions that arise from the feedback (20-30 mins).
5 The facilitator will evaluate the outcome of the session, record useful feedback which will be useful for planning for future events.



Dignity of Women exhibition and discussion piloted in Yorkshire



UKWFN at the Edinburgh Storytelling Centre



Discussion session after the exhibition in Cardiff

SCOPE FOR DEVELOPMENT

The exhibition and discussion workshop provides an opportunity to enhance religious literacy between faith/belief communities, deepening friendships and disperse misunderstanding.

UKWFN will support efforts to engage with this topic. The following pages are the exhibition graphics with a link for high resolution printing. If you or your community need support in facilitating or training your own facilitators, please contact us. We are also keen to encourage multifaith interaction so mounting collaborative events is also possible and welcomed.

The Dignity of Women in the Baha'i Faith
Scriptural Reflections

Women in the Bahá'í faith are equal to men and this equality is a fundamental Bahá'í principle. This is explicit in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith. In the Bahá'í view, women have always been equal to men. Bahá'í scriptures explicitly state.

'There must be no difference in the education of male and female in order that womankind may develop equal capacity and importance with man in the social and economic equation. Then the world will attain unity and harmony.'

('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 108)



'...and among the teachings of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh is the equality of women and men. The world of humanity has two wings -- one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible'

('Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablet to the Hague, p. 7)

For mothers are the first educators, the first mentors; and truly it is the mothers who determine the happiness, the future greatness, the courteous ways and learning and judgement, the understanding and the faith of their little ones.'



('Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 126)

'War and its ravages have blighted the world; the education of woman will be a mighty step toward its abolition and ending, for she will use her whole influence against war.....In truth, she will be the greatest factor in establishing universal peace and international arbitration. Assuredly, woman will abolish warfare among mankind.'

('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 108)



The Dignity of Women in the Buddhist Religion
Scriptural Reflections

Buddhism does not consider women as being inferior to men. Buddhism, while accepting the biological and physical differences between the two sexes, considers men and women to be equally useful to society.



Buddhists view the wife as equal to her husband. The Buddha emphasised the pivotal family role that women play as wife and a good mother. In family life, husband and wife are both expected to share equal responsibility and conduct their duties with equal dedication. The wife is considered a friend, a companion and a partner to the husband. She was expected to acquaint herself with her husband's trade, business or industry so that she would be in a position to manage his affairs in his absence.

" In five ways should a wife (as the western direction) be respected by a husband: by honouring, not disrespecting, being faithful, sharing authority, and by giving gifts."
Sigalovada Sutta DN 31

One day, while King Pasenadi Kosala was having a conversation with the Buddha, a messenger from the Palace approached the King and informed him that Queen Mallika had given birth to a daughter. The King became depressed. Observing this, the Buddha expressed the following stanza:





"A female child, O! Lord of men, may prove
Even a better offspring than a male
For she may, grow up wise and virtuous,
Her husband's mother reverencing, true wife,
The boy that she may bear may do great deeds,
And rule great realms, yes, such a son, Of noble wife becomes his country's guide."

Samyukta Nikaya

"Men are not wise in every situation, women are wise also, and women are equally capable."

Atthaka Nipata

The Dignity of Women in Christianity
Scriptural Reflections

Women are considered equal to men in Christianity. From the beginning of the early Christian church women were important members of the movement. The example of Jesus reveals his attitude towards women, and the Christian Scriptures show repeatedly how he liberated and affirmed them. Women were equal disciples and the first to share the good news of the Resurrection. Jesus treated women with compassion, grace and dignity.



Jesus broke down all divisions and introduced a fundamental equality:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one"

Galatians 3:28

Though a woman cannot do without a man, neither can a man do without woman, woman may come from man but man is born of woman – both come from God. (1Cor. 11:12)

"Jesus always showed the greatest esteem and the greatest respect for woman, for every woman, and in particular He was sensitive to female suffering. Going beyond the social and religious barriers of the time, Jesus reestablished woman in her full dignity as a human person before God and before men ... Christ's way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women".



His Holiness Pope John Paul II, "Thoughts on Women" April 1979

'Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it...men ought to love their wives just as they love their own bodies. A man who loves his wife loves himself...every husband must love his wife as himself and every wife must respect her husband'

Ephesians 5: 25 – 29





The Dignity of Women in the Hindu Religion
Scriptural Reflections

In the Hindu religion a woman has the same religious and spiritual freedom as a man. Like a man, she is the soul in bondage and the goal of her life is spiritual perfection or moksha through selfless service, meditation and yoga. Hindus have elevated women to the level of divinity and they worship God in the form of Divine Mother. Women and men are considered equal and God is worshiped in the female form such as



Durga for strength



Saraswati for wisdom



Laxmi for wealth

Equality and respect for women stems from the Scriptures.

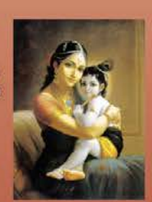
"Where women are honored, there the Gods are pleased. But where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards."

The differences between individuals exist only at the physical level. There are no spiritual differences between man and woman. Husband and wife are the two sides of the same coin. They are the two manifestations of the same atman (soul).

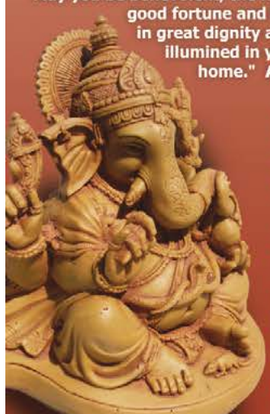


Neither is woman superior to man, nor is man superior to woman. Both are "perfect halves to make a perfect whole." The following quotes from Hindu Scriptures confirm the equality between men and women in all religious and spiritual aspects:

"May our prayers and worship be alike, and may our devotional offerings be one and the same." Rig Veda Samhita 10.191.3



Women are also considered to be the embodiment of great virtue and wisdom.
"O bride! May the knowledge of the Vedas be in front of you and behind you, in your centre and in your ends. May you conduct your life after attaining the knowledge of the Vedas. May you be benevolent, the harbinger of good fortune and health and live in great dignity and indeed be illumined in your husband's home." Atharva Veda 14-1-64.



The mother is revered in Hinduism and should be treated with dignity and respect.

"There is no mode of life that is superior to serving one's mother."
-The Mahabharata

Hindu Scriptures state that the mother is more worthy of reverence than the father or a teacher.

"The teacher who teaches true knowledge is more important than ten instructors. The father is more important than ten such teachers of true knowledge and the mother is more important than ten such fathers. There is no greater guru than mother."
Mahabharata, Shantiparva, Chapter 30, sloka 9.

The Dignity of Women in Islam
Scriptural Reflections

Muslims believe that the Qur'an was revealed 1400 years ago, and with it came an era that revolutionised the status of women. Women were not just looked upon as equal to men; in some cases they commanded greater respect than men:

"...reverence God, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for God ever watches over you." (Qur'an 4:1)



Prophet Muhammad emphasised the role of woman who becomes a mother on many occasions by saying: **"Paradise lies under the feet of your mother"** and when asked by a man who was most worthy of good companionship the Prophet said 'Your Mother' and said that three times when asked again before saying 'Your Father'.

Rights for women were further established; they obtained the right to vote, to education and to inheritance etc. Islam recognises that it is not gender, race or culture that enables one to excel in the eyes of God; it is piety and good works:

"I shall not lose sight of the labour of any of you who labours in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other" (Qur'an 3:195)



*"Verily for all men and women who have surrendered themselves unto God, and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves before God, and all men and women who give in charity, and all self-denying men and self-denying women, and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember God unceasingly: for all of them has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward." **(Qur'an 33:35)***



Education was encouraged as a means of defeating ignorance and encouraging communities to develop and grow so that they might be beneficial for wider society.

"Are those who know and those who do not know alike? Only the human beings of understanding are mindful." (Qur'an 39:9)

"To seek knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim." (Hadith)



The Dignity of Women in the Jewish Religion
Scriptural Reflections

In the Jewish religion, men and women are equal.

'So God created humans in God's image. In the image of God, God created them. God created them male and female.'
Gen.1:27

In Orthodox communities women and men are equal but have different roles; men take services in the synagogue and women are responsible for religious life at home; the domestic environment is as important to the Jewish faith as synagogue prayer. In Progressive synagogues men and women have identical roles and responsibilities.



'Greater is the reward to be given by the All-Mighty to the (righteous) women than to (righteous) men.'

Berakhot 17a (from the Mishna, the Oral law)

Jewish Women have always played a pivotal role in Jewish life. The mother is responsible for the initial religious teaching and for the preservation of a Jewish home life.

She is charged with maintaining a Kosher home, lighting the candles to welcome the Sabbath and Jewish festivals, and ensuring the house is ready for festivals, especially Passover. Women teach across in all Jewish communities and in Reform synagogues can also be Rabbis and congregational leaders.

The qualities of strength, wisdom and leadership are referred to in the Hebrew Bible with such figures as Eve, Esther, Deborah, Miriam, Ruth without placing them in domestic context.



Judges 4:4-5
'Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the people of Israel came up to her for judgement.'

'A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels..... Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue... Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: *"Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."* Proverbs 31:10-31'



'A man without a wife lives without joy, blessing and good; a man should love his wife as himself and respect her more than himself.' Yevamot 62b (from the Mishna, the Oral law)



The Dignity of Women in the Zoroastrian Religion
Scriptural Reflections

The Zoroastrian faith recognizes the equality of men and women.

Zoroastrians believe that mankind and the universe are governed by Ahura Mazda, the Supreme Lord, through his special powers which emanate from him. One of these is Armaiti (Right-mindedness). A nourisher of good deeds, she comes to the rescue of those perplexed by doubts.

In the last Gatha (hymn composed by Zarathushtra, the founder of Zoroastrianism), which celebrates the marriage of Zarathushtra's youngest daughter, Zarathushtra gives advice to both the bride as well as the bridegroom:

"I address words of advice to the brides, and to you, O bridegrooms, So listen carefully to these teachings. Being well versed in religious doctrines, Learn to value the life of the Good Mind. May each of you strive with the other to attain Truth," (Ys.53.5)

"O Mazda Ahura That man or woman who gives me the life Which You know to be the best, Will receive the blessings of Truth and Your Sovereighty through the Good Mind." (Ys 46)





"Thy women worthy of reverence. We revere holy woman advanced in pure-thought, speech, and actions. We revere holy woman well instructed, virtuous, and capable of leadership" (Aiwisruthrem Gah 9, Vispared 3.4)

The Dignity of Women in the Sikh Dharam
Scriptural Reflections



The human soul

All of creation is held in balance by dualities or the play of opposites. We are all ātmās (divine souls) in male and female bodies. This duality allows the human species to procreate, but also allows us to look after each other and survive, by bringing together different qualities and skills. Some qualities we are born with and may be determined by our gender, others we learn from our families, communities and wider society. This is the play of God's creation.

Pavan Gurū, pānī Pitā, Mātā dharat mahat
Divas rāt duei dāei dāeiā khelai sagal jagat
Air is our Guru, water our father, and the great earth our mother. Day & night are the female and male nurses, in whose laps the whole universe plays.



In some scriptural verses, the Creator is addressed as both Mother and Father. In others, the soul is likened to a bride seeking union and completeness with her groom. In a similar way, as humans we yearn to discover and merge with God. Those who seek and attune themselves to God's presence are likened to the female, whose inner qualities of integrity, wisdom and humility have led her naturally to her Beloved. At this level, all humans and all creation are likened to being female in gender and God is seen as the Transcendent Groom and Husband.



Āvahu bhaine gal mileh, ank sahelarhīāh
Mil kai kareh kahānīā, samrath kant kīāh
Come, my dear sisters and spiritual companions; hug me close in your embrace. Let's join together, and tell stories of our All-powerful Husband God.

The role of the mother

A Guru is one who takes us from spiritual darkness (Gu) to spiritual light (Ru). In the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the Eternal Guru and Sacred Scripture of the Sikhs, the mother is described as one's first Guru in life. A mother embodies the spiritual attributes of compassion, selflessness, courage and forgiveness. She is capable of recognizing and strengthening children's inherent spirituality through the thoughtful practice of dharam or faith.

Gurdev mātā Gurdev pitā Gurdev suāmi parmesurā
Gurdev sakhā agiān bhanjan Gurdev bandap sahodra
The first Guru is my mother, the second Guru is my father; the Divine spiritual Guru is my Transcendent Lord and Master. The Divine Guru is my companion, the Destroyer of ignorance;



Social Status

Sikh Gurus taught that all human beings should live with dignity, self-respect and grace as children of God. They should not be subjugated, oppressed or disrespected due to gender or social position. For this reason, the Gurus initiated practical reforms which made the spiritual journey open equally to all and recognised everyone's inherent dignity as a spark of the same divine flame.

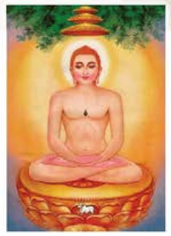
Mata Khivi Ji, the wife of Bhai Lehna Ji, who later became Guru Angad Dev Ji, the second Guru of the Sikhs, is known for her dedicated service in the Gur ka Langar. Mātā Khivī Jī represented radical changes – women serving alongside menfolk, not wearing purdah. The verse below reflects the loving regard she inspired amongst the Guru's followers.

Balvand khīvī nek jan jis bahutī shhāo patrālī.
Langar daulat vandiai ras amrit khīr ghiālī .

'Says Balvand, Mata Khivi Ji, the Guru's wife, is a most noble woman, who gives soothing leafy shade to all. She distributes the bounty of the Guru's Langar; the rice pudding and clarified butter is like a sweet ambrosia...'

The Dignity of Women in the Jain Religion
Scriptural Reflections

Jainism considers men and women as equals. Women in Jainism are treated within the same code of ethics as that prescribed for men. It advocates the code of ethics comprising of the five virtues of nonviolence (AHIMSA), truth (SATYA), non-stealing (ACHAURYA), purity of body and mind (BRAHMACHARYA) and non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH).



Bhagwan Mahavir, the reviver of modern Jainism (6th -5th century BC) preached the equality of all souls and said gender or caste does not determine a person's greatness, a soul becomes great by its actions.

Women are an important part of Jain culture. The Jain community includes two categories of women: mendicants (sadhvis), who live on alms, and those living in society. At a time when women were oppressed and had never been given a responsible role, Mahavir exalted the status of women by ordaining them as nuns (sadhvis). Chandanabala became the first sadhvi in the time of Mahavir. By ordaining women, he announced to the world that women are equal to men.



'One who cultivates an attitude of equality towards all living beings, mobile and stationary, can attain equanimity. Thus do the kevalis say.'
Mahavira (Anuyogadvar, 708, gatha 2)

'A truthful man is treated as reliable as the mother, as venerable as the guru (preceptor) and as beloved as the one who commands knowledge.' **Mahavira (Mulachara, 837)**



Both men and women are expected to play their common roles of helping each other, working for the common welfare of all humanity, and protecting the environment. Each is responsible for his/her own moral conduct. Matters of religious achievements and self development are related to the soul rather than to the body and the difference of sex is merely on the physical plane. Any act, which violates the soul's innate quality of equality and compassion, is essentially violence. Exploiting others, depriving someone of his livelihood, ignoring the pain and suffering of others, treating others as inferior and denying education, knowledge and gender discrimination, are all acts of violence.

"It is the essential characteristic of the wise that they do not harm any living being. One should know that non-violence and the equality of all living beings are the main principles of religion."
(Sutra Krutaanga 1:4:10)

Download the exhibition here

CAMPAIGN

Visible Advocacy Against Gender-Based Violence - Interfaith Male Allies in our Midst

CONTEXT

"Women must be respected, valued, and held in great esteem. A society that does not value its women and eradicate violence against them, cannot achieve peace and prosperity." Ravinder Kaur Nijjar, Chair of UKWFN

The 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence is an annual international campaign (www.unwomen.org) that starts on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, until 10 December, Human Rights Day. The campaign was started by activists at the inauguration of the Women's Global Leadership Institute in 1991 and continues to be coordinated each year by the Center for Women's Global Leadership.

In 2022 UKWFN observed the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence movement by taking an active part in calling for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls. We decided to bring the issue into the public view and for 16 consecutive days, we posted on social media, hosted events, and compiled a video series "Visible Advocacy – Interfaith Male Allies in our Midst". Male allies from different faith traditions spoke about their views, their understanding of the complexity of the issue, and supported the call for the elimination of violence against women.

Watch online

aims:

1 *To raise awareness of women and girls suffering gender-based violence in all settings including at home, at work, in society and at war time.*

2 *To challenge the use and misuse of religious teachings in perpetrating gender-based violence.*

3 *To call upon men and boys to be allies to advocate, uphold and ensure gender equality in their studies, work, social and religious circles.*

4 *To support allies to become ambassadors to support the campaign.*

THE UKWEN EXPERIENCE

1 We launched a consecutive 16 day social media campaign from 25th November to 10th December 2022. We featured excerpts of scriptures, wisdom quotations and our male allies video series on YouTube.

2 Male allies were invited to contribute their views and insight from their particular faith perspective and also from their positions of engagement, proving that rising to the challenge to change the miscarriage of power and force against women and girls is both a personal undertaking and a communal action.



who is a male ally?

UKWFN wishes to establish a team of Male Allies not only to make statements protesting against and challenging gender-based violence, but also to share their stories of positive impact in their home/work/faith and belief environment; we encourage them to:

1 **Speak out regularly, expressing a firm stand against violence against women and girls**

2 **Preach a sermon or lead a session challenging violence against women and girls, emphasising teachings on the importance of equality, dignity and respectful treatment of women and girls**

3 **Host our Dignity of Women – Scriptural Reflections exhibition and discussion in your place of worship or community event**

4 **Attend and share information of UKWFN events and our resources, such as this Toolkit and our YouTube playlists**



The difference between a Male Ally and a Male Ambassador

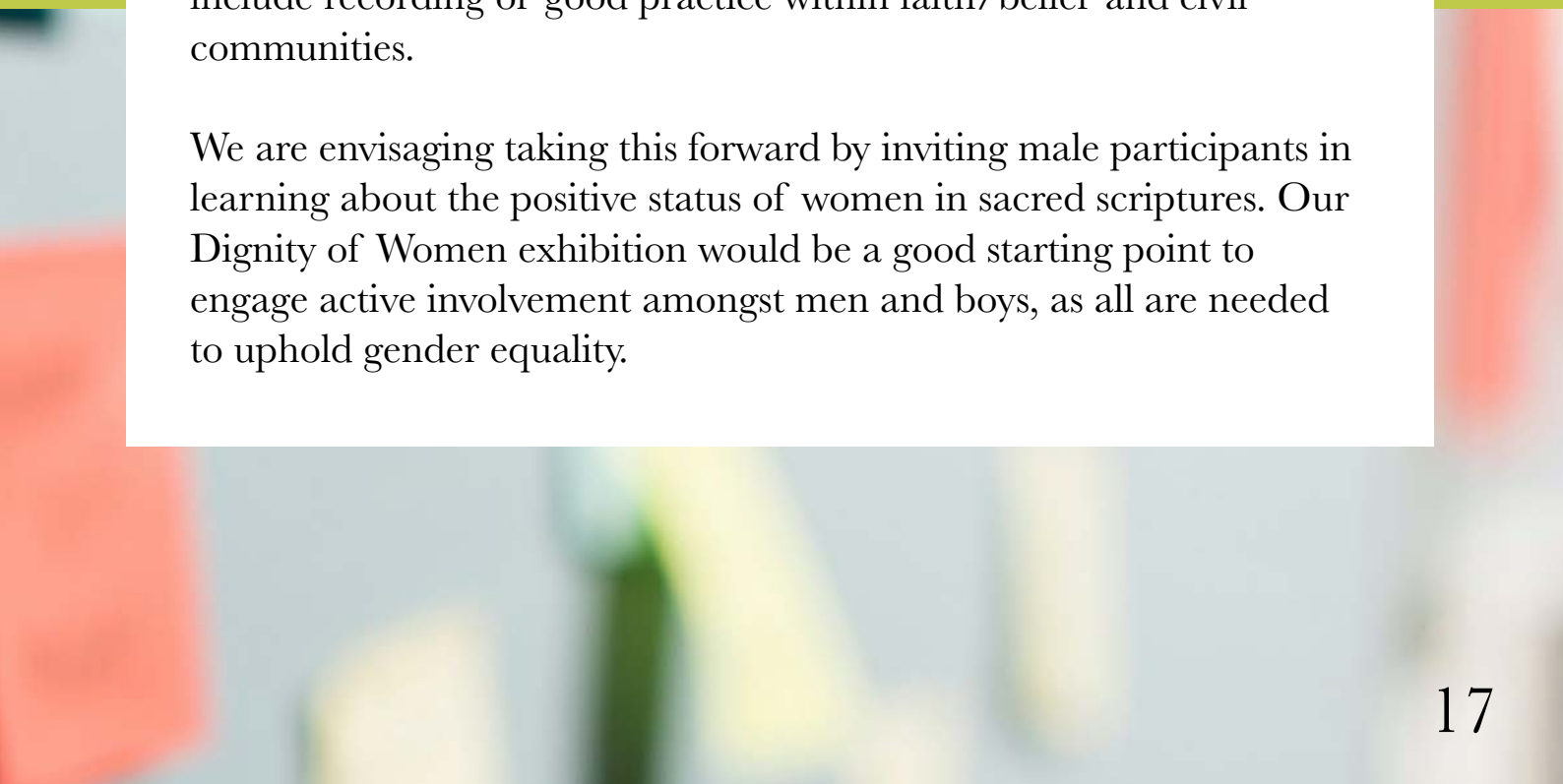
You are our male ally if you already challenge gender-based violence. We invite you to share your insight and stories in your endeavour, and support your needs if you choose to host our exhibition and discussion programme.

An UKWFN male ambassador will actively work towards bringing projects and programmes to improve the positive status of women and protect gender equality. Working alongside the women in your communities, you will be seen a visible advocate in bringing change through active participation in discussions and actions.

SCOPE FOR DEVELOPMENT

UKWFN encourages our Network to take on the challenge of working with possible male allies in their communities in advancing the cause of gender-based violence against women. Such efforts may include recording of good practice within faith/belief and civil communities.

We are envisaging taking this forward by inviting male participants in learning about the positive status of women in sacred scriptures. Our Dignity of Women exhibition would be a good starting point to engage active involvement amongst men and boys, as all are needed to uphold gender equality.



WORKSHOP

Women in Religious Scriptures: how can they inspire and empower us today?

CONTEXT

The sacred scriptures and histories of all the world's religions are full of stories of remarkable women. However, these stories have often been, and some still are, overshadowed by a patriarchal culture where male voices dominate. The situation has certainly improved but UKWFN recognises that we can explore the role of women from the scriptures and take into account that their stories are still very relevant to contemporary life.

Although this kind of discussion is not in itself a novel idea, UKWFN hopes that in sharing each other's stories we learn about the different remarkable women from the scriptures and their stories about how they overcame adversities. Today's women can learn and be inspired by scriptural figures, which will inform and benefit their contemplation and daily life.

The UKWFN Experience

UKWFN invited speakers from different faith traditions to share their views on women from their respective scriptures with the aim of discovering/rediscovering and highlighting some of these stories and using them to inspire and empower women of faith today.

In our events we asked our speakers to

1 choose and comment on a female figure from their scriptures, share the story, and point out the lesson / encouragement / contemplation / inspiration from them.
2 address the barriers women face when trying to access their scriptures and how these barriers may be overcome.
3 share with participants how these stories empower the speaker personally as a woman of faith today.

In the Q&A session participants can discuss and compare

1 the scriptural figures presented by the speakers in detail.
2 scriptural figures with contemporary figures.
3 the struggles and difficulties women face from the past and in the present.
4 how women from our religious scriptures and faith traditions inspire and empower women of faith today.
5 what action you can take in your community as a result of sharing these stories?

Watch series 1

Watch series 2

aims:

1 *To share the stories of women of faith from the religious scriptures, and learn the ancient and modern histories of different faith traditions.*

2 *To reflect upon how these stories can inspire and empower women of faith today.*

3 *To bring together people from different faith traditions for dialogue and to improve understanding.*

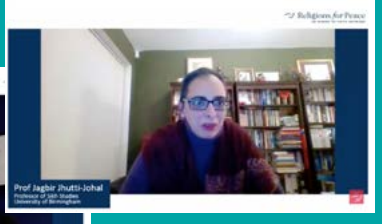
SCOPE FOR DEVELOPMENT

UKWFN will be continuing this series and present women's stories from sacred scriptures and faith traditions past and present. We will be taking the stories we gather, of historical figures as well as modern role models, and compile a resource of women's stories to be used in inter-religious, multi-faith and secular platforms.

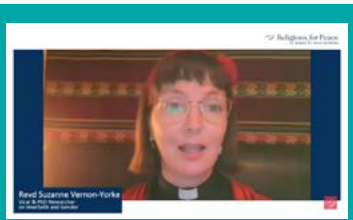














WEBINARS

Inspirational Women: Women in Leadership

CONTEXT

We wish to build a platform where successful women are celebrated, cherished, and their tremendous work acknowledged. More importantly, we wish to let women assume their rightful influence in society and inspire others to reach their best potential.

The Religions for Peace movement recognises that women of faith possess valuable experiences and resources that, when mobilised, can strengthen community-based effective responses for peace and human development. There are many women of faith carrying out tremendous work bringing communities together, but their work is mostly unknown, unrecognised and unrecorded.

Assertive women are known to be subjected to unflattering labels, such as "trouble-makers" or "busy bodies" and other much less polite descriptions. No matter your background, you will inevitably face criticism when you're trying to level the playing-field and carve a more equal future or take the lead to spearhead advancement and/or change.

We at UKWFN believe that women are entitled to the choice of their endeavour, and should not have to fight opposition arising from gender discrimination. We wish to build a platform where successful women are celebrated, cherished, and their tremendous work acknowledged. More importantly, we wish to let women assume their rightful influence in society and inspire others to reach their best potential.

Watch online

aims:

1 *To showcase women of faith and their enormous capacities for leadership and effective action to build peace and promote just and harmonious societies.*

2 *To inspire women in leadership to share their stories and work, so others may learn from their experience and be encouraged to fulfil their aspirations.*

3 *To pave way for women from different faith and belief traditions to meet and discuss mutual interests, hence improve opportunities for exchange and collaboration.*

4 *To advise and encourage the next generation of change-makers, to keep building community, and not be afraid to be seen as "trouble-makers".*







THE UKWFN EXPERIENCE

UKWFN has undertaken to showcase inspirational women on International Women's Days and other memorable days. International Women's Day offers us the chance, once a year, to celebrate and investigate the remarkable contribution of women to improving society and the quality of people's lives. The contribution they make to peace, equality and issues of common concern.

The online events were so popular that we made them into a series of inspirational women videos that can be viewed. These women are role models demonstrating that any woman can lead and make a difference in society.

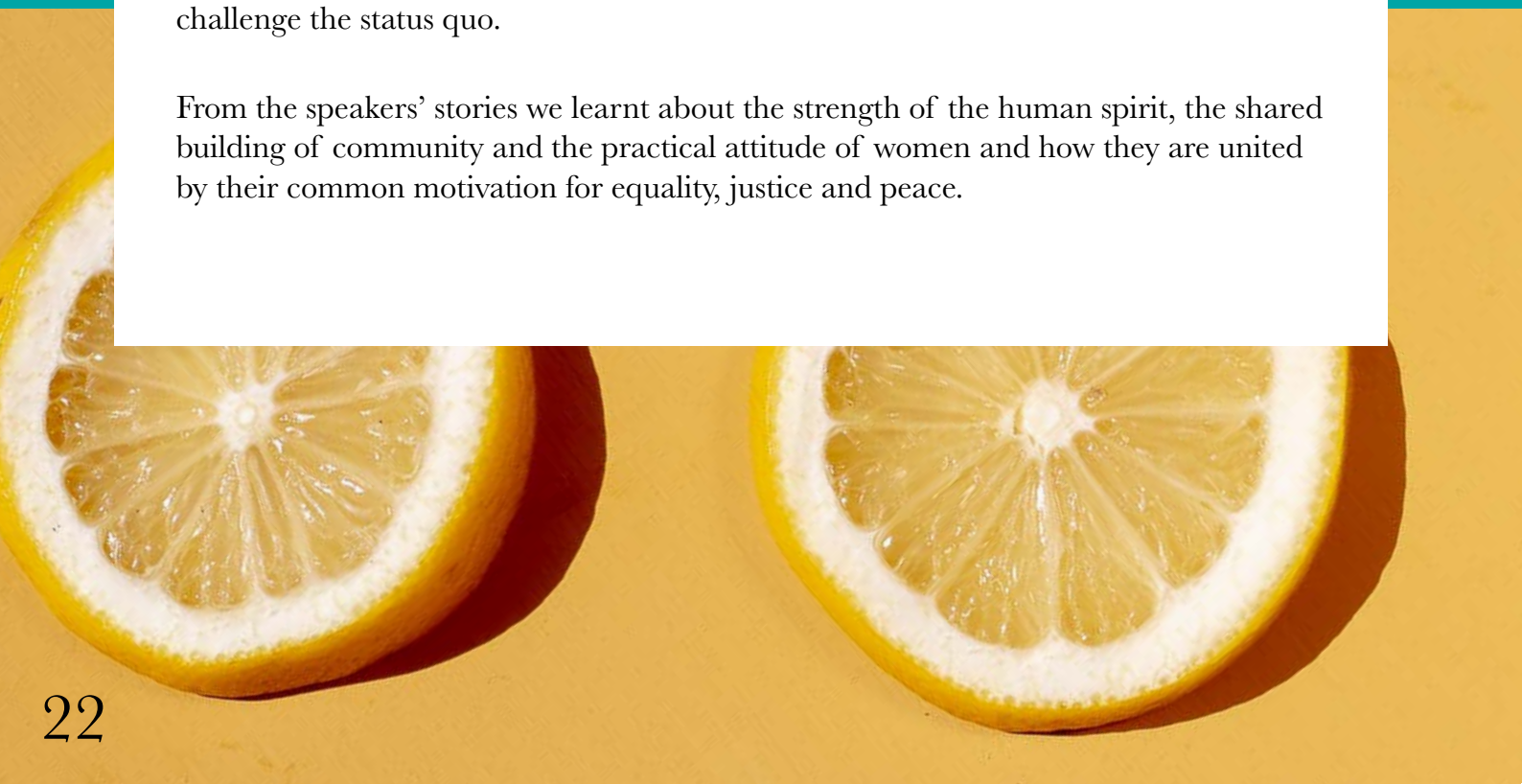
Using the technique of warm personal interviewing by a host, speakers were asked to discuss questions which were sent in advance to them.

The questions were as follows:

1 What motivated them to start on their path of social activism?
2 Which women from their faith or cultural background have inspired them?
3 How did their faith empower them?
4 Which issues do women need to address to continue on the path to equality?

Through asking questions which concentrated on the personal and spiritual motivations behind change-making, we were able to investigate the similarities of our speakers' experiences. Similarities in the barriers and criticism they faced, which surpassed cultural difference. The inequalities they all seek to address, and the social justice at the heart of their faith and cultural tradition which motivates them to challenge the status quo.

From the speakers' stories we learnt about the strength of the human spirit, the shared building of community and the practical attitude of women and how they are united by their common motivation for equality, justice and peace.



SCOPE FOR DEVELOPMENT

UKWFN is very aware of the scarcity of women leadership in some religious and belief circles. By seeking out stories of leadership and achievement, we are highlighting women's stories from their homes, workplace, faith/belief communities and society. We are also opening doors of friendship and communication amongst single, multi-faith, and secular communities. Going forward, we wish to continue our efforts in widening the scope of narrative from women in positions of leadership. UKWFN will seek to assist communities to showcase these women.





SHARING

Spiritual Vibrations for a Positive Mind

CONTEXT

"People of faith reach into their spirtuality when they encounter challenges and difficulties. There is a close link between sprituality and mental well being. In inviting speakers to share their thoughts as Covid 19 spread, we can appreciate how our faith and beliefs nurture a positive mind." Ravinder Kaur Nijjar

Speaking about mental health has always been a taboo subject, the dramatic impact COVID 19 brought a positive outcome for the consideration of this issue, and the subject is now openly discussed in the media. According to the World Health Organization, in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by a massive 25 per cent globally.

Religious communities for centuries have used prayer and spiritual practice to help keep a positive mind with challenges and difficulties in life. Read and view the series on spiritual vibrations for a positive mind.

After successive lockdowns in the UK, during 2020 and going into January 2021 it became evident to UKWFN that people's mental health was inevitably suffering. The dual effect of accumulated worry due to the pandemic's effects on people's lives, and the fact that they were separated from their communities or normal support networks, presented a clear need. The sudden pressure hoisted upon what was already difficult times after Brexit and rising living costs indicated an urgent need for action to attend to the wellness of our minds, and UKWFN decided to launch the Women of Faith Sharing Prayer/Spiritual Practice for a Positive Mind weekly series.

Our first event started in January 2021, and weekly gatherings were called on Zoom until the end of March. Piloting with a small group of around 5, we quickly reached groups of 20-30, many of whom returned each week. The feeling of positivity and the spiritual vibrations we felt during these events encouraged us to start our UKWFN new Youtube Channel: giving the opportunity for others to listen and share in the prayers and advice offered from multiple faith and cultural traditions.

aims:

1 *to learn from two women of faith each week on what in their scriptures and personal practice helps them keep a positive mind*
2 *to provide a safe space for women to meet and support each other.*

THE UKWFN EXPERIENCE

In our sharing sessions, we heard reflections and prayers from women representing the following faiths and traditions, Christian, Baha'i, Hindu, Jain, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Interfaith, Humanist, Sikh, Zoroastrian, Druid/Pagan and Brahma Kumaris.

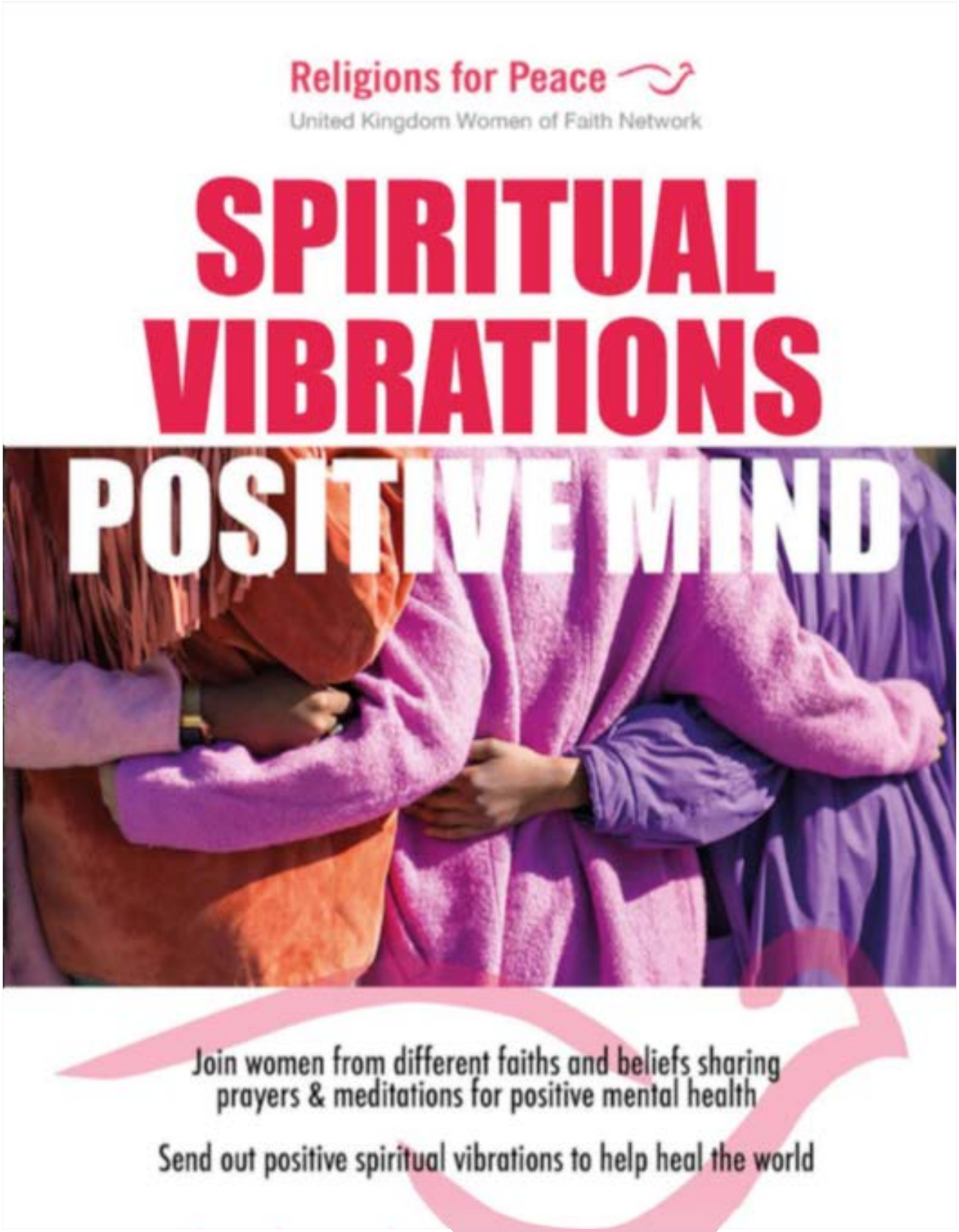
We ran half hour presentations/prayers in a diverse group setting. Our speakers brought their faith into focus, shared their challenges as well as their way to seek positivity in time of need. Here are some areas brought up for discussion:

1 What elements of your faith addresses the peace of mind?
2 What prayers do you like?
3 How are they different to your own routine?
4 How do you keep a positive mind?
5 What prayers/spiritual practice are helpful to the mind?
6 Ask young people how they keep a positive mind, establish channels of communication with them and find ways to let them alleviate their pressure

In inviting women of faith to share at our sessions, we encountered a wealth of wisdom from different faiths and beliefs, different professions, different ages, different religious practices, and different ways to tackle life challenges.

We have also invited professionals in the mental health field to speak about the relationship between spirituality and mental health, the speakers brought their passion into their work and we learn that there are tangible links between religious practice and mental wellbeing.

Aside from the obvious benefit our speakers brought to relieve the incredibly pressures women faced in daily life, UKWFN benefitted greatly from the multi-faith interaction, getting to know our friends and supporters better, and firm foundations were laid for future endeavour.



Watch online

SESSIONS

Women & the Environment

CONTEXT

"The love of nature is human instinct, it is woven into the fabric of our will to live and prosper. Being part of the tapestry of Creation, we cannot shirk that bond. Whether by idle ignorance, greedy disregard or deliberate war and destruction, we have brought ourselves to the brink of no return. Let us act now with resolute diligence. We all deserve a decent place to call home." Cinde Lee

Planet Earth which many religions call Mother Earth provides everything that all living things need in order to flourish, but human beings have plundered its resources, added to pollution in the air, sea and land. Industries have systematically ignored the eco system and exploited in a manner that is detrimental to our Planet. It is evident that the damage to nature is reaching an irreversible stage and human existence itself is threatened, many already suffer from depletion of resources, and may not ever recover. The circumstances are worsened by natural causes of climate fluctuation, leading to increasingly unstable environment in the past decades and currently.

Historically, extreme climate changes have caused human conflict, mass migration, geopolitical instability, and war. We are seeing all that happening right in front of us. Hard times hit women the hardest. They bear the blunt of shortages, uncertainty, instability, and violence. We look at the enormity of the issue and often find ourselves quite speechless and helpless, wondering what one person can do to avert disaster and destruction. However, when lots of individuals work together insurmountable challenges can be met.

UKWFN has taken a multi-faceted approach to tackle this complex issue. Environmental concern is one of RfP International's global key priorities, our solution is to bring the issue into dialogue and from that into action.

aims:

1 *To feature women who make spiritual connection to the environment and share their religious teachings and practice.*

2 *To highlight the negative impact of hardships caused by environmental crises on women.*

3 *To partner with other organisations to explain the science, the urgency, and the societal and individual responsibilities towards caring for the environment and bring constructive changes.*

4 *To explore solutions and possible collaboration opportunities.*



UKWFN in partnership with University of Glasgow Interfaith Chaplaincy planting a 'Tree of Peace'

THE UKWFN EXPERIENCE

UKWFN has taken a multi-prong approach to tackle the issue, on both spiritual and pragmatic levels.

In a series of Spiritual Vibrations for the Earth, women of faith were asked to share what religious teachings from their faith backgrounds make them value, cherish, and seek to protect the environment. We discussed the damage we have caused, and we recognise and reaffirm that action must be taken with the utmost urgency.

We have invited front line environmental organisations such as WWF and Restore to explain to us their work, how they analyse and formulate their strategy to bring relief and improvement to the environment, and how each of us can bring change on a personal level.

The Let Earth Breathe, Plant Trees, Restore Biodiversity project put into practice that we can all make a concrete difference by planting symbolic of Trees of Peace. Women shared the significance of trees in their religious traditions and Trees of Peace were planted in places of worship, universities and we established RfPUK Peace Grove (www.treesforlife.org.uk)

The series of events gave us the science, the vision, and the method to act. Knowledge of what we can do and how we can contribute is truly a moment of empowerment. We are not helpless in the face of the work ahead of us.

Scope for further development

The future of Spiritual Vibrations for the Earth will continue, and UKWFN will be encouraging women from different faiths to work together and make the environment agenda get more ingrained into the national psyche.

We will seek out more environment protection organisations to feature their work, so we can learn from their efforts and programmes. They can also peer into the spiritual dimensions of caring for the environment from our Network, and open up broader understanding between vision and practical endeavour.

The RfPUK Peace Grove will certainly carry on, UKWFN is working with academic institutions to experiment with restoring biodiversity. This effort is the impetus of developmental work that will rewrite the narrative of how individuals and faith/belief communities can take on environmental protection work. From tree planting we can affect the concept of how restoration work will become the new building blocks for a planet we are not ashamed to leave to our future generation.



Religions *for* Peace
UK WOMEN OF FAITH NETWORK

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