

# **Study Report on the ICCFR Conference on The Couple Relationship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to ICCFR for giving me the opportunity to be a participant at the Conference on The Couple Relationship in 21<sup>st</sup> Century. During the conference, I not only gained knowledge but also deepened my understanding of the couple relationship from different perspectives in varied professions, countries and cultures. In regard to the issue of the couple relationship, people in all walks of life such as psychologists, counsellors, social workers, family therapists, lawyers and scholars may have different views, even in the same country. At the conference, changes and trends in the couple relationship were discussed in diverse contexts. As a Chinese social worker participating in this international conference, I would like to share my understandings and thinking, in the following four sections.

## **Deeper understanding of the development of the couple relationship**

Professor Angela Abela elaborated the meaning of the couple relationship and discussed the importance of healthy couple relationships from different perspectives of physiology, social culture and social psychology. The following are my thoughts.

First, the meaning of the couple relationship has evolved from reproduction, which dates back to primitive times, to feelings of belonging, loyalty, love and romance. It has become the most important social relationship in different countries and cultures. With the development of economies and societies, for the adult man and woman, the main purpose of getting married is no longer to reproduce a male heir to carry on the family line, but to find love and belonging. However, new problems and challenges are posed in the change. For example, couples have higher expectations of romantic interactive needs and take a stronger view on mutual loyalty, which therefore exerts pressure on the relationship. What is worse, extramarital relationships, the increasing number of divorces and other problems have emerged. Under these circumstances, the conference presenters, in group discussions, highlighted the balance between power and intimacy between husband and wife with different social and cultural backgrounds, and stressed the need for more attention to be paid to changes in the marital relationship in the new era.

Second, the couple relationship, serving as the basis of the family, wields influences on other family relationships, including parent-child relationships, daughter-in-law relationships and the growth of the next generation, and in the long run on the development of the whole society and region. Hence, exploration of the healthy couple relationship, as well as solutions to the current marriage and family problems, are of great significance.

## **Large differences and common challenges co-exist**

Family problems differ between developed countries in Europe and developing countries. The development of the family relationship has evolved into an "advanced" stage, in which the status of women in the family and society has risen. Women receive more recognition and get better education, which contributes to a more equal couple relationship and better ways to deal with family conflicts. For example, a large number of divorced couples in areas where divorce is commonplace maintain good relationships with each other, which helps in reaching agreements on raising the children, as well as reducing negative influences on the children when parents live apart. On the second day of the conference, guest speakers mentioned that, for couples in their countries areas, maintaining an unhealthy marital

relationship would be their last choice. When the relationship is broken, couples are inclined to choose to divorce. In contrast, Chinese couples seem to tend to take the impact on children into consideration when it comes to dealing with couple relationships. Many divorced couples do not know how to balance their relationship with parenthood. Often, there is anger and bitterness when a marriage breaks up, causing a negative effect on children. The reason why they continue to "live apart" is not only about the children but also reflects the traditional view, in which divorced women are marked as "abandoned", especially divorced women with children to raise. They have difficulties in finding a new partner and entering into a new marriage. Therefore, women in China tend to maintain their current marriage. Thanks to the development of the Chinese economy and society, women's economic and social status are rising. They will not face too many challenges in life even if they are divorced. The proportion of divorces in China, especially in urban areas, is increasing, as mentioned in Professor Agnes Koon-chui Law's speech.

Similar problems are found in other areas and countries in the world. For example, the prevalence of divorce and of premarital sex has increased. Although women's social status and rights in developing countries in Asia are the subject of increasing concern, the overall position of women still needs to be improved.

### **Couple relationship theory and practice advance continuously, as do solutions to couple relationship problems**

What I found particularly beneficial from the conference was the findings and ideas from academic research and frontline practice shared by experts from different fields and countries. Changes in social relationships as well as interactive romantic relationships were discussed in the context of the development of the internet. The internet provides more appropriate services to couples and families, likewise network counselling. An interesting tool – friendship cards and couple cards – were introduced in Julian and Joanna Sant Fournier's workshop on the third day of the conference. The cards help children and couples make the right choices so as to enjoy a stress-free and happy life.

I plan to apply to these new ideas to my work, with the consent of Julian and Joanna Sant Fournier to my translating the friendship cards and couple cards into Chinese. In addition, I was inspired and expect to apply more new tools and methods to upgrade my family consultation service. Taking big data as an example, a customized training service is of great significance for the solving of problems when a considerable amount of data is available on the internet.

### **Exchanges between different regions and organizations worldwide are significant**

It has been my privilege to participate in this conference to learn from practitioners in advanced regions, and it has inspired me to seek solutions to tackle problems and face challenges in China. What developed countries have encountered will be reproduced in developing countries. Learning from developed countries will contribute to promoting the further enhancement of the couple relationship in China, and new methods will fulfil new demands in a timely way. At the same time, developed countries are exposed to new challenges such as the legalization of homosexual partnerships and the challenges of adopting and raising children in same-sex families. Moreover, understanding how to deal with the relationship between children and non-biological parents, even if the meaning of marriage has become broader, is of great significance to the study of couple relationships in China.

Last but not least, personally speaking, having an overall understanding of the culture and situation in other countries helps a lot in international exchanges. Not only governmental

but also non-governmental contacts are of importance. In this way, people around the world will know more about China and eliminate ignorance and misunderstanding.