

Malta 2018 Conference Summary

Submitted to the Suzie S. Thorn Family
Foundation

By Claire N. Barnes, MA

It was a privilege to represent the Suzie S. Thorn Family Foundation at the ICCFR, Malta Conference, **The Couple Relationship in the 21st Century**. Additional Foundation representatives in attendance at the February 2018 gathering were Justin Dorham and Suzie Thorn.

The Conference theme set the stage for family service professionals, family law representatives, policy makers and volunteers from around the world to gather, exchange ideas and become familiar with best practices focusing on couples and families.

Day 1: The day began with a welcome speech from The President of Malta, followed by a Keynote Address on *The Significance of the Couple Relationship in the 21st Century* by Prof. Angela Abela, University of Malta. It is important to note, Malta is a small, Catholic country and all social service practices are heavily influenced by the Catholic Church. (Notably, divorce has only been legal in Malta for the past 5+ years.) Policy and research work done in Malta stresses couple and family preservation.

A panel discussion on *Closeness and Power in the Couple Relationship* featured remarks by representatives from Egypt, China and Malta. Gender issues, as they impact power and control in a relationship, were most relevant to this panel discussion.

The afternoon session began with a panel discussion on *The Romantic Ideal: Changing Norms and Expectations*. The broad range of the panel included participants from Malta, Sweden, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and England. The issues of same sex couples were included in this discussion. The contrast between romantic practices in Middle Eastern countries compared with those in the West was understandably a focus of conversation.

Day 2: The day began with welcoming remarks by the Honourable Michael Falzon, Malta Minister for Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity. Judge Falzon made special mention of Malta's governmental efforts to develop a Positive Parenting Policy.

The first Keynote Address, *Couple Therapy and Attachment Narratives*, was given by Prof. Arlene Vetere. Dr. Vetere highlighted the role of attachment in adult relationships and how attachments strongly influence the quality of life at all stages of adulthood. I personally found her to be a fascinating speaker and will explore her work and research.

Next, the Panel Discussion, *Diversity across Couple Relationships and Single People*, highlighted the similarities and differences between adults who live as part of a couple and those who live a single life. The participants were from England, India and Scotland. It was clarified that the arranged marriage custom in India is still practised in most families, with a slight modification to respect expressed preferences by the young adults when a partner choice is made. (The arranged marriage custom is rooted in many cultural practices designed to preserve status and caste boundaries.) The lives of those adults living single by choice was a

new (and interesting) topic selected for this conference.

The afternoon session featured a Keynote Address by Drs. Carolyn and Philip Cowan titled *Parenting and the Couple Relationship*. The Cowans are colleagues from Berkeley, and their presentation was on their strategy (begun around 2006–2007) related to helping fathers improve their parenting skills. Their programme has been in place long enough to gather important data on the efficacy of the approach and is being replicated nationally and internationally – most recently by the University of Malta and funded by HSBC Bank. Many of the Americans in attendance have heard the Cowans present before.

Day 3: Day 3 began with welcome remarks by Anne Berger, Chair ICCFR. The ICCFR (with support from the Suzie S. Thorn Family Foundation flowing through the ICCFR Trust) has mounted these international conferences for over fifty years.

A panel discussion, titled *How Relationships are Changing in Different Parts of the World*, followed the welcoming remarks. Countries represented on the panel were Germany, China, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Memorable comments included:

- China has adjusted its one-child policy for urban couples to two children. Dr. Agnes Law said many of the young women who staff her family service agency are taking time off to have their second child.
- There is some flexibility in Saudi Arabia around the requirement for women to wear the hijab in their homes when ‘outsider’ males are present. It was suggested if the group of people includes close friends who socialize together, the requirement is often relaxed.

Discussion Groups followed the Panel. Discussion Groups are a signature element of ICCFR conferences, and they offer a chance for Conference attendees to exchange ideas, react to the presentations and generally express themselves in a multicultural environment. This was the only set of Discussion Groups scheduled during the Conference.

Workshop Session I

I was privileged to be a workshop presenter on the topic, *Family Estrangement: A growing societal problem in developed countries*. I was very gratified at the interest in the topic, and the workshop was oversubscribed. Attendance was approximately 45 people and the room was filled to capacity. I have not seen evaluations, but informal feedback was very, very positive. Interest in the topic was high and it is apparent the practitioners in attendance wanted to learn more about the subject matter.

The closing Conference remarks were given by Dr. Ruth Farrugia, Director General, President’s Foundation for the Well-being of Society, Anne Berger, Prof. Angela Abela and President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca.

Additional Observations

The social activities, including a reception hosted by The President, informal happy hour gatherings and conversations over lunch, are a vital element in these conferences. Exchanging ideas with international colleagues enriches the professional and personal lives of everyone in attendance.

There was emphasis on gender roles during the Conference, highlighting the struggles of

women to aspire, achieve and lead in their respective countries. The majority of workshop presenters and attendees were women, so it's fair to say the women's collective voice was well represented. Multiple ethnicities and countries were represented – Malta (the majority), Belgium, Germany, Finland, the UK, Italy, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United States are examples. The ICCFR is always looking to expand participation by underrepresented countries.

My thanks to the Suzie S. Thorn Family Foundation for supporting my participation.

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