



‘CROSSING BORDERS - Young women's role and contribution to the interfaith dialogue in Europe’

Report of the study session held by European YWCA's –
Young Women's Christian Association in co-operation
with the European Youth Centres of the Council of Europe

European Youth Centre Strasbourg
2-9 April 2006



This report gives an account of various aspects of the study session. It has been produced by and is the responsibility of the educational team of the study session. It does not represent the official point of view of the Council of Europe.

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Terms of reference

Title of the study session:

“Crossing borders – Young women’s role and contribution to the interfaith dialogue in Europe”

Date and venue of the study session:

April 2-9, 2006
European Youth Centre Strasbourg (EYCS)
30, rue Pierre de Coubertin
F – 67000 Strasbourg, France

Tutor of the study Session:

Elizabeth Kasa

Preparation team of the European YWCAs:

Martta October (Course Director)
Mien De Graeve, YWCA of Belgium
Sibylle Mani, YWCA of Switzerland
(Renata Minnibajeva, YWCA of Latvia)

Participants:

Number of participants: 30
Countries: Albania (2), Belarus (2), Belgium (1), Bulgaria (1), Estonia (1), Finland (2),
Germany (2), Georgia (2), Great Britain (1), Iceland (2), Japan (1), Latvia (2), Palestine (1),
Poland (2), Romania (3), Sweden (3), Switzerland (2).

Resource persons:

- Guido Baumann, Switzerland
- Chia Longman, Belgium

Working languages:

English and Russian with simultaneous interpretation

Introduction

The European YWCA's is an organisation under the umbrella organization of World YWCA aiming to promote the leadership of young women and empowering them to make a difference in their own surroundings and societies. The YWCA's purpose is **to develop the leadership of women and girls around the world to achieve human rights, health, security, dignity, freedom, justice and peace for all people.**

Looking at the late geopolitical phenomena, it seemed that a study session regarding interfaith dialogue was perhaps more than urgently needed in Europe. The discussions and media attention that were triggered by events such as the cartoons about Prophet Mohammed shed light to the fact that European attitudes towards religions and different faiths can and should still be regularly checked and that there is still a lot to do in contributing towards a respectful and equal interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

The key to tomorrow's attitudes and ways of thinking lie in today's youth and thus it is extremely important to get young people together to learn and discuss about matters as important as interfaith dialogue is to make sure that ignorance is less likely in tomorrow's world than what we encounter today. As a women's organisation we saw to be of crucial importance to include to the discussion the specific angle of women, what can **young women** in particular do to promote interfaith dialogue in today's and tomorrow's Europe.

We wanted to approach interfaith dialogue with a realization of gender and its effect on attitudes and roles within the European dialogue. Also, the aim was to make the study session quite personal so that people would need to look inside themselves to recognize who they are and where they come from entering the interfaith dialogue with somebody else.

In January 2006 we started with a call for participants, European women under the age of 30. The thought was to include as many as possible women of different faith denominations but as a Christian organisation the applications we received were predominantly from Christian women.

Thus the method of the study session became increasingly introspective, as if we were preparing ourselves for future encounters with "the Other", not so much that we were able to create such encounters during this study session as yet.

In the beginning of April 2006, 30 young women gathered together on this



**The participants to the study session,
at the European Youth Centre Strasbourg**

spiritual journey to themselves and reflecting their ideals and those of their local organizations on the others.

During the week we were to learn more about different faiths, learn about women's role in them, and mobilize ourselves with tools to promote, enter and handle interfaith dialogue. The group turned out to be surprisingly diverse, despite the fact that we represented the same organisation and were all women of similar age from different locations within the Eurasian continent.

In the following passages we try to take the reader through our week on a day-to-day basis. After this we try to summarise two valuable inputs offered by two experts – Guido Baumann from the WeltEthos Association (Switzerland) and Chia Longman from the University of Ghent (Belgium). At the end of this report we introduce the evaluation form that was filled in by the participants at the end, and then we take a look on the results of that evaluation. As annexes are also included a list of the people involved as well as the programme table of the week.

We hope you enjoy the journey with us!

I. Aims and objectives of the study session

The objectives of the study session were:

- To explore the challenges that exist within different religious traditions and denominations which reinforce the exclusion, oppression and subordination of women and young women
- To review the current global and European situation on interfaith dialogue and to identify how young women from European YWCA's can successfully address issues of peace and justice through interfaith dialogue in the context of today's Europe
- To recognize and analyze stereotypes and prejudices on religions and to identify ways to deal with them
- To define the role of the YWCA and its sister organizations in helping to bring peace and justice in a pluralistic context
- To identify successful models and practices and develop tools to enable young women to promote peace and reconciliation in their own communities and to provide leadership in the areas of inter-religious and intercultural understanding
- To accompany each other in a spiritual journey that is nourished by different faith traditions and one that is based on a celebration of diversity and commitment to life.

These objectives are based on the Directorate of Youth and Sport's priorities related to *intercultural learning* and *social cohesion* (specifically dealing with religion as important part of culture and potential source of conflict when encountering "difference"). Taking into account the importance of interfaith dialogue in nowadays context and the role of youth organizations in identifying possibilities for action, the study session was also promoting *youth participation* (as it aimed at empowering young women from YWCAs for taking an active role in promoting interfaith dialogue, from local to global level).

II. Daily reports of the study session

Monday April 3, 2006

Objectives of the day:

- to introduce team and participants to each other
- to introduce the aim and the objectives of the study session
- to present the local YWCA's as well as the World and European YWCA
- to build up an atmosphere of trust among the participants
- to familiarize with the topic of the week

After arriving the previous evening and getting to know each other a little the team and the participants met up in the morning with an energizing moment combined with a name game to refresh our memories with everybody's names.

The 2006 study session on interfaith dialogue in Europe and young women's contribution to it was opened by the course director Martta October and then officially welcomed by Ms. Tina Mulcahy, the director of the EYCS. Mr. Florian Cescon from the Council of Europe gave some ground rules and handy tips about the premises and administrative side of the week. The team members proceeded by introducing the program of the course, the aims and its objectives and some of the daily methods of working: The morning energizers and the "mysterious" X and Y moments that were to take place at a fixed hour every day of the week.

An important part of the first day was also to get all the participants familiarized with the audio-technology of the plenary hall, and to learn to take turns in commenting with the microphone in front of them.

Then we heard an introduction of the World YWCA performed by the two World YWCA interns among the participants, namely one of the Swedish participants and then the Japanese participant together. It was an informative all-round presentation and most useful was the introduction of the world organisation-level aims and objectives, which we were later in the week able to link with the aims and objectives of the local YWCA organisations.



Monday's afternoon session had a lot to do with group building and also giving some personal thought on why we were there. One exercise was planned to evoke the participants to think introspectively and look at their expectations of the week ahead, some aspirations and some fears that they faced. Many mentioned as a wish the chance to connect with each other and as a fear many saw the chance of not being understood in a dialogue, which was very interesting, considering the topic of the study session.

The team-building exercises of Monday were partly physical and partly mental and afterwards we took time with the participants to analyze how they felt about the outcomes. The participants commented that they saw the exercises more as group building rather than team building, and that they felt like the cell-metaphor used in the game made them feel as if they supported each other and were in fact part of something larger. The participants also commented on how the game went better when they worked under some set of common rules, as opposed to at first, when everybody just tried from their individual points of view to simply win the game.

In the afternoon session of Monday, the group began to approach the topic of the week by trying to map out the religious world, to make sure that everybody talks about somewhat same things when we talk about Judaism or Islam, etc. This was an interesting moment because it revealed that the level of information of other religions varied among the participants significantly. However, it seemed like everybody could learn something new so the exercise seemed to prove its point.



Like on an exhibition, each religion was presented on the wall. In small groups the participants were moving with out speaking from on to the other poster and had to read the information. It was very interesting to see, what the participants knew about this specific religion.

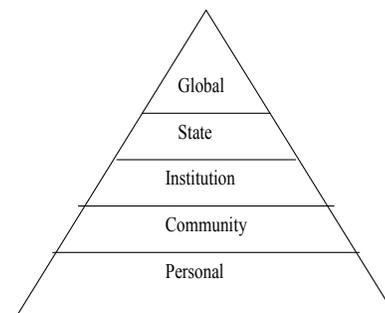
As a general remark from the first day the group came together quite well and it proved out to be a very artistic and creative group of young women, which would give us a lot of challenges to nurture and provoke that creativity during the rest of the week.

Tuesday April 4, 2006

Objectives of the day:

- to present and discuss different levels/areas in which problems may arise in the encounter between religious difference
- to understand the current situation for inter-religious-/ intercultural-/ interfaith-Dialog and discuss potential ways to undertake this dialogue
- to invite participants to think about their own roles and possibilities for acting in this context
- to provide space for sharing information and networking for future co-operation and get to know the culture of each country a bit better (through the intercultural evening)

After having presented and discussed the differences between the main religions of the world, the participants started to think about the current obstacles in opening a dialogue between these religions. In this regard, the **different levels of inter-religious problems / conflicts** were analysed through using a scale with the following levels:



The participants had to work on groups and debate the following question: Which are the problems that are encountered at different levels? Who is involved? How often these situations appear? What is the precedent? What is their impact?

Among the cases brought as example, one can mention:

- *personal level*: religious difference as problem between two individuals to wed, or the (non) acceptance of the minority representative by the family.
- *community level*: different practices and the way the members of the other religious community relate to that (i.e slaughtering of animals)
- *institutional level*: wearing clothes with religious meaning or symbols in schools (crosses, the veil for women)
- *state level*: conflicts between two main religious groups within the same country (i.e India)
- *global level*: conflict between main religions.

After the presentation of the problems, the groups had to choose one of the presented problems and illustrate it, in order for the other participants to think about ways in which these problems can be addressed. *Forum theatre* was the method through which the audience could add their own solution of dealing in this situation.



The further discussions illustrated the fact that most of the problems have a root at the lower level and that each action with effect on the global level has to be started by working at the first two levels: personal and community. The exercise offered to the group the possibility to understand the current situation and its complexity, but also created a visual frame for the participants to imagine where their own activities for promoting inter-religious dialogue could be placed.



In the afternoon, **Guido Baumann**, Manager of the Association „Weltethos Schweiz“ (World Ethos Switzerland), gave a lecture about:

- **Inter-religious / Intercultural/ Interfaith-Dialogue** and its meaning, with an introduction to the current situation of the multicultural and multi-religious environment
- Milton Bennett's model of intercultural development (also applicable in the inter-religious environment)
- **The World Ethos project and The circle of building up an religious-identity**
- The Inter-religious competence and the human rights

The main outline of Mr. Baumann's presentation is illustrated in Chapter III of this report, together with its major accompanying illustrations. The key message of the input can be illustrated as it follows:



No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

No dialogue between the religions without global ethical standards.

No survival of our globe without a global ethic.
Hans Küng

After the lecture, there was time to ask questions. The participants were extremely interested in the topic, although they found it quite difficult to handle so much information in such a short period of time, some of the materials were quite sensitive for some members of the group. Nevertheless, the lecture gave a lot of new information and ideas to work with for the rest of the week. At the end of the lecture, all participants received the booklet "The global ethic project"*.

The evening was dedicated to meeting and presenting other cultures through the *intercultural evening*. All represented countries organised displays with special food, some pictures, a market place. They also had to present their own country. The participants gave their best and after this intensive afternoon, it was a great evening to relax, enjoy and to get to know more about other countries.



Images from the intercultural evening presentations

* **WORLD RELIGIONS – UNIVERSAL PEACE – GLOBAL ETHIC**, Stephan Schlenzog, Global Ethic Foundation Tübingen(June 2005)

Wednesday April 5, 2006

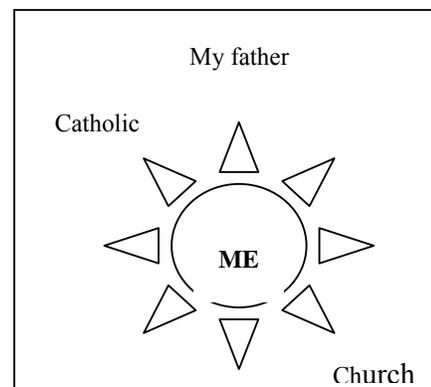
Objectives of the day:

- to give the participants an opportunity to discover their own religious identity
- to share personal experiences and ideas with other participants
- to learn to recognize stereotypes and prejudices and how to deal with them
- to get some rest, to build up new energy and to explore Strasbourg during the free afternoon

Wednesday morning was reserved for a few sessions on discovering ourselves and in particular our religious identity. The session was built on the principle that only when knowing where you come from and understanding your current position within your own religion and towards other religions, is it possible to enter an interfaith dialogue.

After the morning energiser participants were invited to close their eyes and prepare for starting a journey to the roots of their religious identity. Quiet music helped to create an atmosphere of reflection and introspection. A series of questions was read out slowly to the participants to help them structuring this journey into their own identity. The questions became gradually more specific and intimate, challenging the confrontation of each of the participants with herself.

At the end of this very personal journey the participants were led back carefully into reality and a model to structure their experiences was proposed to them: a flower, each petal being sides/aspects of one's own identity. In the heart of the 'flower of religious identity' is the 'I'. The petals of the flower are all the persons, events and institutions who have influenced the religious identity of the 'I' during the time.



In small groups (2 or 3 persons) the participants shared their thoughts about their religious identity and explained to each other how this identity has been formed. From an observational point of view and also from what the preparatory team learned during the evaluation at the end of the day, this was an extremely precious and personal moment for each of the participants. They learned a lot about both themselves and others and about respecting and understanding differences.

Even during coffee break everybody was very silent and introspective on Wednesday, so we needed a gentle warming up to get into the programme again. This was provided by a very interesting and revealing game called **S-watch**. Two groups of participants were asked to write down adjectives they associated with certain categories of people. Later on the adjectives were read out loud and the participants were asked to describe the kind of person that they were thinking about when hearing these adjectives.

In plenary this S-watch game was followed by a short but very clear and useful explanation about stereotypes and prejudices and about some strategies to deal with

them. We finished the morning session with a perception exercise and the iceberg-metaphor.

Most of the participants were very happy about this morning on "me and religion" and they considered it a necessary and very helpful session to start reflecting on their own role and action in the interfaith field. Of course the free afternoon was well appreciated too!

Thursday April 6, 2006

Objectives of the day:

- to include gender to the thought process of interfaith dialogue
- to give thought to the personal motivation of having joined the YWCA
- to draft suggestions and regards to the YWCA World Council meeting to be held in Nairobi in 2007

The morning began by a lecture by Dr. Chia Longman about gender and religion. After learning about the women's role in the main religions we found out that there is a special code of behaviour for women in all of them. In all religions men and women can be seen as equals in the scripts but often because of the interpretation of the scripts the women's status has historically been lower than the man's. We also found out about some distinct differences between the countries in the world. Feminism as a movement has strong connections with the interfaith dialogue and certain scholars have studied this field profoundly.

In the afternoon we approached the goals and objectives of the organization. Every participant wrote down the specific goals of YWCA (&YMCA) in their country. Then they were linked to the goals and objectives of the World YWCA. We found out that every country has some similar or common goals with the World YWCA, and we created a physical link on a map between the local organisations that share common aims and objectives together.

After that every participant reflected their personal motivation of being a member of YWCA, is it mostly because it is a

- **Y** – youth organization
- **W** – women's organization
- **C** – Christian organization
- **A** – association.

We found out that people join the organization for different reasons. By knowing that it was a little easier to understand why we have different visions for the organization.

Lastly we had a panel discussion with some timely and interesting topics:

- YWCA is primarily a Christian or a women's organization?
- Christianity, the "C" in the YWCA, is it a strength or a burden for the organization when entering in interfaith dialogue
- A "broader" vision of Christianity means that a Muslim can be a member of the YWCA

- In taking action in interfaith dialogue, YWCA should take the first step towards other religions/religious organizations.

There were lively discussions about those topics. The participants represented their own visions and got to see quite concretely how opinions were divided about some of the most concrete and basic notions about Christianity and its role within the organisation. However, at this time of the week the group already knew each other that well, that an open discussion in good faith and respect for the fellow participant was possible.

Finally the participants were divided into five groups and each tried to find some goals and recommendations for the Word Council meeting and the organisation's next four years. Each group presented their ideas in a creative way (outdoors). These ideas were not developed enough to constitute a real platform document, but they can definitely serve for orienting action according to local YWCAs' needs. Among these ideas we can mention:

1. Facilitating interfaith-intercultural dialog and contribute to the elimination of domestic violence
2. Promoting Christian growth
3. Promoting better communication between the different national YWCA's
4. Promoting - within YWCA - a greater understanding and respect for local and global cultures, diversity and faiths.
5. To raise awareness of religious sensitive issues into YWCA's policies and actions
6. Focus on orphans, children from different social background, people with special needs/disabilities
7. Clarify the definition of YWCA: Not to missionary (in a traditional way) if YWCA wants to work with inter-religious dialog. Specify the fact that YWCA is open to work with other religions! Christianity is not important to be a member of YWCA! (Through the light of the why Y, W, C, A session)
8. Working against the commercial sexual exploitation of children (prevention, rehabilitation) and develop activities for more emotional support for children
9. Work in close cooperation with the government about the problems with trafficking of women

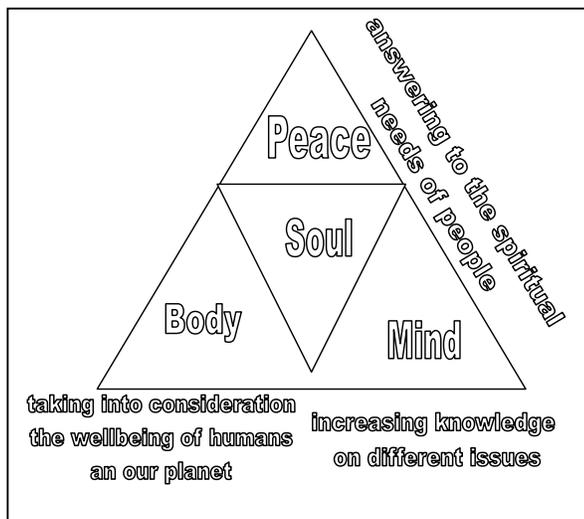


Illustration by participants about the role of the YWCAs.

To wrap up the long day we had a moment of reflection outdoors, which one of the team members, Sibylle Mani, had organised. The whole group stood in a circle and every one got one candle. Each person passing the light said what she could do after this study session on the topic of interfaith dialogue in their country or community. The prep team gave each participant a candle with the symbols of the five main religions.

In the evening the whole group watched a movie, “A fond kiss” about the interfaith dialogue on a personal level between a catholic school teacher and a Muslim man in today’s Scotland.

Friday, April 7, 2006

Objectives of the day:

- to learn about project design and management
- to identify topics/ideas for acting towards interfaith dialogue
- to work individually or in groups for developing interfaith dialogue projects

Friday, as second last day of the study session played an important role in shifting the discussion on the interfaith dialogue towards the future. After having addressed the need for promoting interfaith dialogue at local level, regional, national but also in connection with the world movement, and after having analysed the role and possibilities of the YWCA members to do that, it was time to start designing action for future activities.

The structure of this working day was:

1. **Input on “Project management”**, by Elizabeth Kasa, aiming at introducing a model for projects’ life cycle and raising awareness for different stages in designing and implementing (an interfaith dialogue) action. The input was based on the resources from the *T-Kit on Project management*.
2. **Brainstorm on the ideas for interfaith actions**, whose results ranged from 2 hours meetings with students in university, to conferences, seminars, summer camps.
3. **Work in group or individually on developing projects for actions** to be undertaken in promoting interfaith dialogue. This work has been based on a common template developed by the team and required the participants to define their actions in terms of title –duration-aim and objectives-target public-main steps-resources.

Most of the participants worked in national groups, as the ideas for actions were context-specific. Several others formed groups and worked on bigger projects (i.e youth exchange with the participation of numerous countries). The team members served as resource persons.

All in all, the day was very busy. The groups worked in a very intensive way to the extent that some of the members could really enjoy the free evening, others were still working on their project! Some of the participants watched the movie “Anna and the King” about the interfaith dialogue between an English schoolteacher who came to Siam in the 1860s to teach the children of King Mongkut.

Saturday, April 8, 2006

Objectives of the day:

- to present the projects of each group to the plenary
- to give and to get constructive feedback
- to evaluate the study session
- to close the study session officially

After the morning energizer and the presentation of the programme of this last day, every group got a little extra time to work on the last details of their project and the presentation on a poster.

A short but very clear and understandable theoretical input on feedback followed. This was really useful because shortly after started the presentation of the projects and every participant was encouraged to write down her feedback on each of the projects.

The presentation of the projects took a big part of the day's time but everybody agreed on the importance of it. First of all these projects were the very concrete and tangible result of one week hard working and brainstorming. Further only through a presentation of their work the participants could learn from each other and contribute to each others projects. And finally, these presentations were a very good exercise for everyone to try and present their ideas in a clear and compact way.

At the end of the presentations there was half an hour to read and discuss the feedback on the projects in the small groups and then everybody enjoyed a welcome coffee break!

That gave all of us the energy to take up the last but surely not the least important official part of this study session: evaluation! Each participant received an evaluation form to write down remarks and reflections on the programme, the approach, the general atmosphere etc.

Later on, the participants went into the Y-groups and in a very short time they prepared a music performance to reflect their general feeling about the past week. In the meantime the prep-team put up a stage in the dining room. Everybody enjoyed the funny and creative spectacles that followed.

Only a few things were left to do: the official closure of the study session by Florian Cescon, the distribution of certificates, dinner... and a wonderful farewell party, which the participants organized themselves!

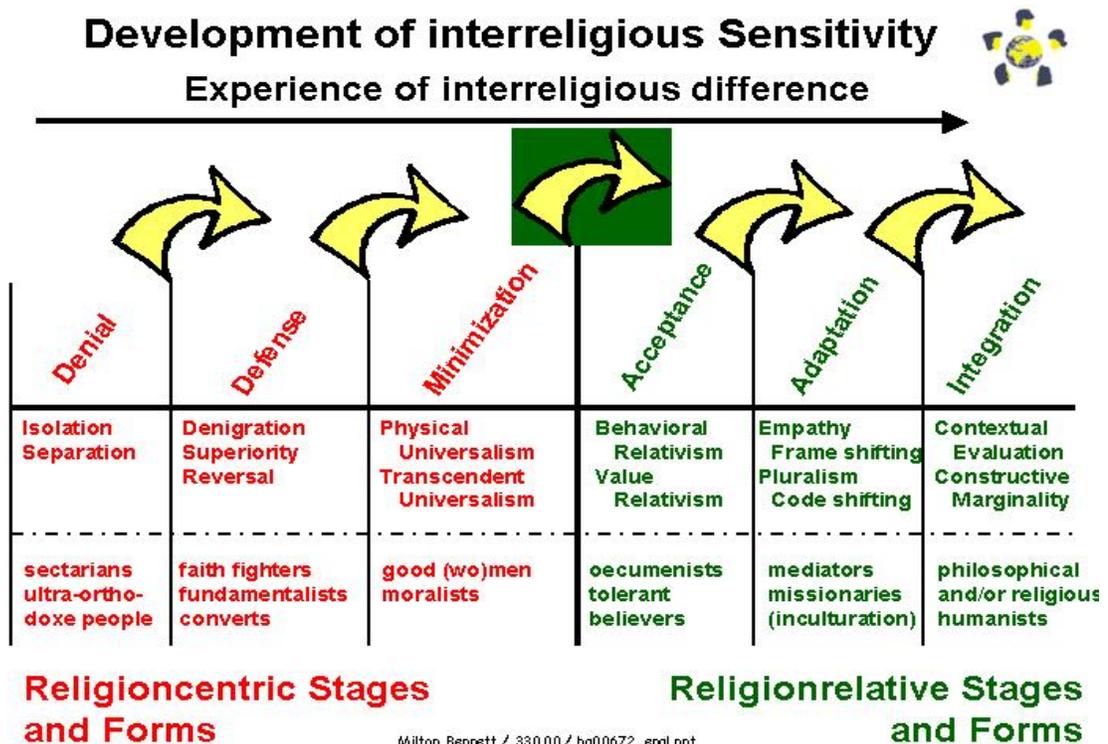
III. Presentations by experts

Guido BAUMANN, Manager of the Association „Weltethos“, SWITZERLAND

The main points in Guido Baumann’s lecture were:

- **Interreligious-/ Intercultural-/ Interfaith-Dialogue** and its meaning, with an introduction to the current situation of the multicultural and plurireligious environment
- Milton Bennett’s model of intercultural development (also applicable in the interreligious environment)
- **The World Ethos project** and **The circle of building up a religious-identity**
- The Inter-religious competence and the human rights

While illustrating the **process of development of interreligious sensitivity**, the human profile seems to be subject of a Golden Rule: Change for prospective, empathy. This process can be illustrated as it follows:



These stages were represented as it follows:

- **Denial**: isolated communities such as Amish people, people in Asian island or sects,
- **Defence**: the stage when conflicts appear, people who are seeing the world in only WHITE and BLACK claiming their superiority, having a dominant view, defending their religion OR people converting (from Christianity to Islam for example) their religion which appeal to extreme actions and terrorist attacks. In this stage it is very hard to accept negotiations
- **Minimization**: in this stage human dignity is the priority, also part of Human Rights
- **Acceptance**: people accept the differences and this is a stage where dialogue can start; real tolerance. For example: Red Cross accepted the diamond as a symbol.
- **Adaptation**: the perspectives change here. For example: the Islamic Barbie is named Razanne.
- **Integration**: is the stage where people have to integrate from traditions and bring them to their traditions and beliefs.

Another important aspect in Guido Baumann's presentation was related to the **Project World Ethos** that also facilitated the discussion of **What is a global ethic?**

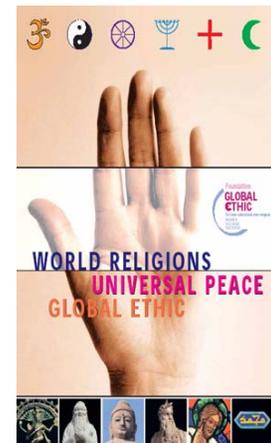
The question of a Global Ethic stems from Professor Hans Küng's book "Global Responsibility" (1990), which was first published in English in 1991. This book developed programmatically the idea that the religions of the world can make a contribution to the peace of humankind only if they reflect on those elements of an ethic which they already have in common: on a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards and personal attitudes.

Underlying the Global Ethic project is the basic conviction that there can be:

- No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
- No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.
- No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.

The first major result of this investigation of the foundation of the religions was the "Declaration towards a Global Ethic" which was endorsed by the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993. The draft was written by Hans Küng in the Institute for Ecumenical Research at the University of Tübingen. With this declaration, for the first time representatives of all the religions reached agreement on principles for a global ethic and committed themselves to four irrevocable directives, which took the following concrete form:

- Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life.
- Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.
- Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness.
- Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women

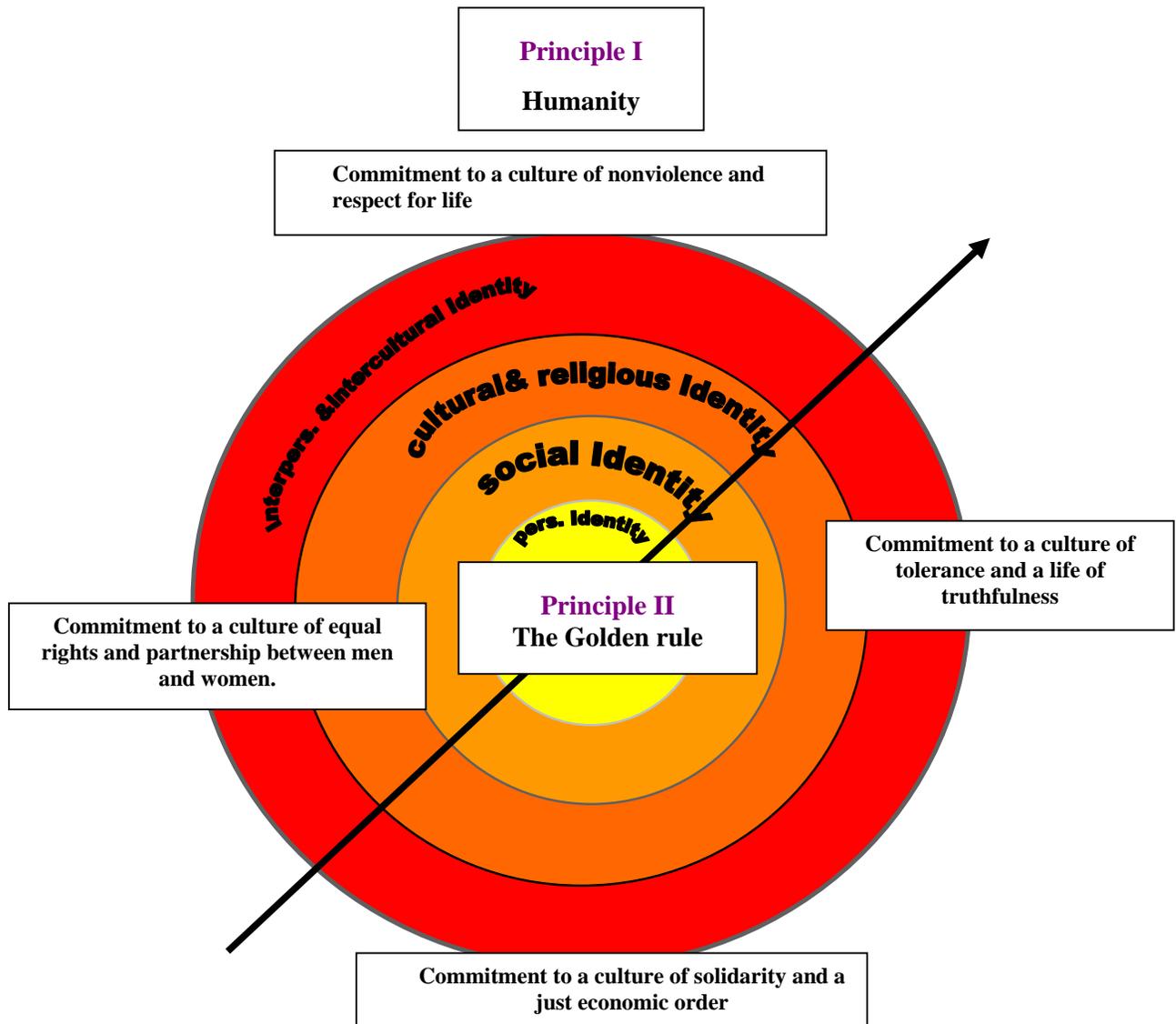


The basic of those commitments are building the 2 principles:

1. **The principle of humanity:** every human being must be treated humanely.
2. **In practically all cultures and religions** of humankind there is a second rule which develops this formal basic principle – the ‘Golden Rule’ of reciprocity: ‘What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others.’

Since then this declaration has become the fundamental document for the development of the idea of a global ethic, rules of social life is indispensable for holding a community together.

Following the presentation of the World Ethos projects, the expert presented **The circle of building up an religious-identity**, using **Weltethos** as a personal compass, as a help for orientation.



The 2 principles and the 4 commitments from the Project World Ethos were presented like help lines for the own orientation, as a compass, which is all the time pointing to the north. If one would apply this model to the acting as a personality (created as result of the social, cultural and personal background), for the daily life this means to focus all the decisions and acting with humanity towards each person we meet. The middle of the acting is the golden rule of give and take.

The last point in Guido Baumann’s lecture was referring to **Interreligious competence and the human rights**. He explained that in the discussion about human rights, the interreligious- intercultural competences the basic of successful conversations. It means to understand the different ways of thinking and to know that the basic of the golden rule *‘What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others’* exists in all religions, as presented in the presented in the following image:



BUDDHISM

A state that is not pleasant or delightful to me must be so for him also; and a state which is not pleasant or delightful for me, how could I inflict that on another?
Samyutta Nikaya V, 353.35-354.2



JUDAISM

Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you.
Rabbi Hillel, Shabbat 31a



CHRISTIANITY

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.
Matthew 7.12; Luke 6.31



ISLAM

No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.
40 Hadith (sayings of Muhammad) of an-Nawawi 13



CHINESE RELIGION

Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.
Confucius, Analects 15.23



HINDUISM

This is the sum of duty: do nothing to others which would cause you pain if done to you.
Mahabharata XIII.114.8

Chia Longman, from the University of Ghent in Belgium, gave a lecture on “**gender and religion**”. Listed below is an overview of the topics she treated. Due to limited time however she could not speak elaborately on each of these items.

- General introduction
 - main objectives:
 - deconstructing stereotypes: differences and similarities in women and religion cross-culturally
 - religion as a tool of either oppression or empowerment for women
 - conditions for interfaith dialogue and possibilities for women’s participation
- Introduction
 - A very short overview of women’s status in religions worldwide: attests to cross-cultural diversity and similarities (*illustrations*)
 - E.g.: world religions versus indigenous religions: different conceptions of ‘religion’, mainstream institutionalised religions versus marginal/heterodox traditions
 - Exceptions to patriarchy
 - Female power versus male dominance?
- Concepts
 - gender and religion
 - gender as a cultural construction
 - religious constructions of gender and gendered experiences of religion.
- Feminism/women’s emancipation and religion (illustrations: Christianity & Judaism)
 - Secularism/humanism: feminism as anti-religious
 - Equality as sameness: women’s access to male roles
 - Feminist religions?: patriarchal religion as ‘beyond repair’ (Mary Daly, goddess spirituality)
 - Equality as difference: equivalence?: maintaining difference and gender roles
- Religion as oppressive/empowering to women?
 - Women’s secondary status?
 - Deconstructing stereotypes: religious minorities in multicultural societies
 - Women & Islam: women’s issue and islamophobia (e.g., Ayaan Hirsi Ali, headscarf debate...)
 - Feminism, multiculturalism and religion (Okin: the colonial perspective)
 - Women & fundamentalism: women as victims and participants (cross-cultural examples: catholic, evangelical, islamism...)
 - Women reclaiming religion as a means to emancipation (Islamic feminism, Jewish feminism, etc.)
- Conclusion: Women and interfaith dialogue
 - Discovering similarities
 - Beyond neo-colonialism and cultural relativism

4. Closing remarks

This study session was a great opportunity for the different organizations and members of the YWCA network to meet, find out about their activities, and see what unites them and what specific activities they undertake each, due to the particularities of the region/country they work in.

Secondly, the study session offered the occasion to explore the topic of “religion”. The participants could explore the role of religion in their life and their realities and to identify possibilities for action as women – Christian women - young people in promoting the interfaith dialogue. Not least, the participants learnt to design actions for promoting interfaith dialogue, which are collected and can serve as database and resource for all YWCAs in Europe and not only here.



Not last, this study session raised awareness of the aims and objectives of the World YWCA and how they are reflected in the activities undertaken at local level; how these may differ within the local organizations due to specificities of local contexts, but yet how all YWCA representatives share the same values and believe in the need for getting involved in interfaith dialogue.

This is why, when deciding that promoting interfaith dialogue might become one of the Organization’s objectives, the study session allowed many local YWCAs to reflect on how relevant this topic is and what can be undertaken in this sense. And moreover, to learn about designing actions, to effectively design them, to collect them and further on, act towards promoting interfaith dialogue – locally, regionally, at European level and worldwide.

To many of us the study session served also as an eye-opener to notice how often the differences begin already within our own organization and on the other hand how some of the differences between different faith denominations can at first seem unbearably significant but perhaps under closer scrutiny one can actually find a lot of things in common.



The weight that an individual is to place on the differences has a lot to do with the attitudes of that specific individual. It is up to the person whether you look at a cup as being half empty or the same cup as being half full. An interfaith dialogue-based study session was to be linked with the old notion of the Council of Europe that was visibly present at our plenary hall too, that of: all different – all equal. There are differences and similarities in

all of us, and faith is just one of the possible distinguishing factors that people can use in order to categorize and understand better the world we are all living in.

The participants also prepared projects on similar project development sheets, at the end of the study session, the full contents of which would be a topic of another study session and

thus are unfortunately too large to present fully in this context! In general, the participants felt it useful to approach the issues in predominance within national groups, with the exception of a few groups of tackling the issue on a more general level with the participation of several nations. On one hand it was logical that most of the participants worked within the national groups, as the ideas for actions were very much context-specific. Several others formed groups and worked on bigger projects (I.e. youth exchange with the participation of numerous countries, etc.)

Most of the groups targeted the improving of the mutual knowledge and communication between different religious groups in their home regions, leading towards a more peaceful and rich co-existence and to a more general understanding of the role of women in these different traditions. Therefore, most of the groups started the process from a very introspective point of view which was of course very fruitful to the whole session. The development sheets formed a set of resources and information for the participants as they were able to learn from each other's plans and projects in each other's countries, which the participants were able to utilize at the end of the session.

Thus, in completion, we would like to think that most if not all of the objectives of this important study session were met during this hardworking and interesting week. A big thank you for making all of it possible belong firstly the Council of Europe who provided us with the premises, the educational advice that we received which was absolutely top of the range and the means to approach this topic that our organization wanted to raise. Also, the prep-team would like to thank the office of European YWCA's in Geneva for assisting the team in the selection of the participants among many other practical matters.

Last but not least we would like to thank the participants, who took part in this study session with an open mind and a willingness to learn new things which constantly challenged the prep-team during the week to make our best efforts towards drafting an interesting and creative program for the week. The warmest possible thoughts go to the prep-team, who worked extremely well together, complimenting each other and supporting one another during the challenging task of running a study session concentrating on interfaith dialogue.

On behalf of the prep-team, in Helsinki, October 1, 2006

Martta October
Course Director

ANNEXES:

1. Daily programme

EUROPEAN YWCA YOUTH STUDY SESSION: CROSSING BORDERS – YOUNG WOMEN'S ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN EUROPE
2nd-9th of April 2006

Time	SUN 2.4.	MON 3.4.	TUE 4.4.	WED 5.4.	THU 6.4.	FRI 7.4.	SAT 8.4.	SUN 9.4.		
8:30 - 9:15	B R E A K F A S T									
9:15 - 9:30	E N E R G I Z E R									
9:30 - 11:00	A R R I V A L S	Official welcome & Presentation of the study session, team and participants	Mapping the religious world, Part II : Problems	Me and religion	Gender and Religion	YWCA planning interfaith action	YWCA planning interfaith action (cont.)	D E P A R T U R E S		
11:00 - 11:15		C O F F E E & T E A B R E A K								
11:15 - 12:30		Presentation of European YWCAs	Part II : Problems (cont.)	Me and religion (cont.)	Gender and religion (cont.)	YWCA planning interfaith action (cont.)	Presenting Action Plans (cont.)			
12:30 - 14:00		L U N C H								
14:00 - 16:00		Group building	Part III: Interfaith dialogue	Free afternoon	Religion, gender, me and the YWCA	YWCA planning interfaith action (cont.)	Evaluation			
16:00 - 16:30		C O F F E E & T E A B R E A K								
16:30 - 17:45		Mapping the religious world, Part I : Main religions	Part III: Interfaith dialogue (cont.)	Free afternoon	Religion, gender, me and the YWCA (cont.)	Preparation of projects (cont.)	Official Closure			
17:45 - 18:00		T H E " X " - M O M E N T								
18:00 - 18:30		T H E " Y " - M O M E N T								
19:00 - 21:00		DINNER			<i>Dinner in town</i>	DINNER				
21:00 - ...	Welcome evening	Presentation of local YWCA's	Intercultural evening	Movie night		Free evening	Farewell party			

B. AIMS

Please indicate with a tick/mark on the line how do you feel that the following aims were achieved during the study session:

- **To explore the different religious traditions and denominations and how these could lead to the exclusion, oppression and subordination of women and girls**

/-----/-----/
0% 100%

Additional comments:

- **To review the current global and European situation on interfaith dialogue as frame for the actions of young women from European YWCA's**

/-----/-----/
0% 100%

Additional comments:

- **To recognize and analyze stereotypes and prejudices on religions and to identify ways to deal with them**

/-----/-----/
0% 100%

Additional comments:

- **To define the role of the YWCA and its sister organisations in contributing to the interfaith dialogue and thus helping to bring peace and justice in a pluralistic context**

/-----/-----/
0% 100%

Additional comments:

- **To identify successful models and practices and develop tools to enable young women to promote peace and reconciliation in their own communities and to provide leadership in the areas of inter-religious and intercultural understanding**

/-----/-----/
0% 100%

Additional comments:

- **To accompany each other in a spiritual journey that is nourished by different faith traditions and one that is based on a celebration of diversity and commitment to life**

/-----/-----/
0% 100%

Additional comments:

C. GROUP and OWN PARTICIPATION

1. How would you describe in one or two adjectives or a phrase the group dynamics at the study session?
2. Did you learn from the other participants in this study session? Please explain.
3. Was your own experience in the subject taken into consideration?
4. How would you describe your own participation to the study session?

/-----/-----/
Not active *All the time very*
active

Additional comments:

FUTURE

How useful/relevant was this topic for you?

What will you take back to your local YWCA from this session?

How will you utilize what you have learned at the study session?

What kind of support you need once back home and from whom?

TEAM and LECTURERS

Please evaluate the following: (Please specify).

- The preparatory team of the session

- The external experts

EUROPEAN YOUTH CENTRE

Please evaluate the following elements (Please specify).

- accomodation
- meals
- the translation/interpretation
- other (please specify)

OTHER INFORMATION

How would you evaluate the preparation for this study session? (For example, did you receive enough information on time? etc.)

Do you have a suggestion for the topic of a future study session by YWCA?

Any other comments?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND EFFORT! ☺

ANNEXES: 3. Results of the processing the participants' evaluation forms

1. Programme

Most participants were very happy about the programme in general: the average appreciation was around 80%.

According to the participants the most useful elements in the programme were:

- the lecture by Guido Baumann, because it offered some very useful tools for interfaith dialogue
- the workshop about “Me and religion” because it helped each participant to discover herself and to prepare for the dialogue
- the workshop and exercises on project planning because they offered a lot of learning opportunities
- the methods and approach in general

Less useful to the participants were:

- the lecture on gender and religion by Chia Longman, because it was too long, too fast, too difficult and too formal
- the energizers in the morning: it took too much time and some of the games were too childish
- the brainstorming on the concept of religion and on world religions
- the X-moment, because at the end of the day most participants were too tired to sit down and listen to a quite difficult story

Participants point out that they learned a lot about (women) in religion, about the development of inter-religious sensitivity, about ways to overcome stereotypes and prejudices and about project management. Other learning points were the work of the Council of Europe and the very diverse work of other YWCA's in Europe and the world.

After the study session participants consider themselves more prepared to write projects and accomplish these, to work in teams, to get and give feedback, to listen carefully and to help others to become more tolerant. Some of them say that they feel ready now to get over the denial phase and move to the acceptance phase (cfr. Guido Baumann). Still on a personal level some of the participants say that they feel more comfortable now with their own belief and their own feelings.

In general this study session was appreciated because it offered a lot of contacts and ideas for creative methods.

However, some of the participants indicate that the study session did not, and in some cases did not at all, fulfil their expectations:

- the most important and most frequent remark was the **absence of participants from other than Christian religions** and thus the impossibility to experience a real interfaith dialogue
- some people expected more experts and a more theoretic approach but most participants thought there was too much theory and they would have liked more free time and more movement

- the games on the introduction day should have been linked somehow to the programme
- also lacking was some clear and readymade information on funding
- around one third of the participants would have wished much more spiritual moments during the study session and missed scheduled prayers moments

2. Aims and objectives

Not all the participants gave clear information on their opinion on how the study session achieved the objectives or not. But still it is possible to get an idea of the global feelings.

- **objective 1:**

to explore the different religious traditions and denominations and how these could lead to the exclusion, oppression and subordination of women and girls

general appreciation: 60%

remarks:

Chia Longman gave a good and interesting introduction on this subject but there was much more time needed to make everything clear and to discuss this deeper. Also for a lot of participants the information given by Chia Longman was too abstract and they missed some examples and some advises to handle situations of oppression and exclusion.

- **objective 2:**

to review the current global and European situation on interfaith dialogue as frame for the actions of young women from European YWCA's

general appreciation: 75%

remarks:

It was interesting and very enriching to discuss the religious situation in other countries, although some participants found that this views were too small and personal and they would have liked a more objective and broader European/global perspective.

- **objective 3:**

to recognize and analyze stereotypes and prejudices on religions and to identify ways to deal with them

general appreciation: 72%

remarks:

There was a very good and useful theoretical part on stereotypes and prejudices. Also the introduction to this theory (S-watch exercise) was well appreciated. But most participants felt that they did not get enough methods, examples and exercises on how to deal with these stereotypes and prejudices in real life. Some participants also missed a more particular part on stereotypes and prejudices concerning women (and religion).

- **objective 4:**

to define the role of the YWCA and its sister organisations in contributing to the interfaith dialogue and thus helping to bring peace and justice in a pluralistic context

general appreciation: 82%

remarks:

Nearly all the participants agree on the relevance and necessity of this objective. Most of them found that we had very interesting discussions on the role of the YWCA and on the function of the 'C' in the name of our organisation. On the other hand, this discussion was not concluded at all during this week: it needs much more exploration in order to really define the role and position of the YWCA in interfaith dialogue. From there on, we can start exploring our possibilities to contribute to peace and justice worldwide.

- **objective 5:**

to identify successful models and practices and develop tools to enable young women to promote peace and reconciliation in their own communities and to provide leadership in the areas of inter-religious and intercultural understanding

general appreciation: 80%

remarks:

The most important tools that were developed during the study session are the projects that everybody took home. Some participants stress however that these projects have to be realized in order to function as a contribution to interfaith dialogue: the idea is not enough, there has to be a real change too!

- **objective 6:**

to accompany each other in a spiritual journey that is nourished by different faith traditions and one that is based on a celebration of diversity and commitment to life

general appreciation: 67%

remarks:

In general participants felt that they learned a lot from each other and that they came a step closer to tolerance in the end. Some people missed praying and defined spiritual moments, other were very happy that praying was not included in the official programme.

The most important reason why a lot of participants find the study session did not fulfil this objective is because there were no participants from other faith traditions. It was therefore impossible to make this spiritual journey nourished by different faiths.

3. Group and participation level

The group dynamics as described by the participants were: friendly, positive, energetic, creative, alive, joyful, active, open, enthusiastic, balanced, changing!

All participants agree on the learning opportunities that they got through the dialogue with other participants. From each other they learned about other YWCA's, other

countries, different cultures and religions, differences within Christianity, and diversity in general.

Most participants feel that their own experiences and contributions were appreciated and valued, especially when working in small groups. One person points out that nobody ever asked her anything about her religion, although she felt that maybe she could have had a valuable contribution.

Participants judge their own participation level around 72% in general. They tried to participate as much as possible, but sometimes they felt too tired, or the amount of information was so huge that they could not digest it properly. Also language was a burden: a lot of participants found it difficult to express themselves in a foreign language, especially in plenary. Therefore the work in small groups was very much appreciated.

4. Relevance for the future

The topic of the study session was considered very useful, especially these days. Most participants will take home a lot of information, ideas, projects and contacts. They want to share the knowledge and skills they gained during the study session with the volunteers and members of local YWCA's but they would like to use it in their personal lives too.

Some participants are highly motivated to carry out the project they designed, others will write articles on the topic for the local newsletter and will discuss interfaith dialogue in their local association.

To carry out the project, they feel that they need more support from experts and trainers and also finances are necessary.

A few participants remark that the local YWCA's should distribute clear information on such a study session before sending people to it, so that these people can make a conscious choice if they want to attend or not and so that nobody is disappointed in the end.

5. Team and lecturers

The participants are very positive about the **preparatory team**. They praise the good collaboration within the team, the fact that every team member contributed to the whole with her specific knowledge and experience and the democratic way of leading the study session.

They experienced the team members as friendly, creative, helpful, open-minded and professional persons. Although some people mention that the team should have paid more attention to the time schedule, everyone agrees that they had a challenging job and all appreciated the wide variety in methods in order to make each of the extremely diverse participants happy.

The **experts** (Guido Baumann, Chia Longman) have also contributed in a real positive way to the study session. Both lectures were interesting and fitted well into the topic of the study session.

Especially the lecture of Guido Baumann was welcomed very much by the participants. He was clear and understandable, he tried to answer all the questions participants asked him and he had an interactive way of dealing with his subject.

Also Chia Longman was very knowledgeable and interesting, but her performance was not really adapted to the public. Most people found her lecture too difficult and it was a pity that there was no time left for asking and answering questions.

6. European Youth Centre

Most participants say that **rooms** were clean, comfortable and safe. There are some complaints about rooms that were not cleaned and that it was too cold in the rooms.

The food was considered excellent and tasty by most of the participants, although others say clearly that the menu was monotonous and not very healthy, that there was not enough fresh fruit at all and that nearly everything came fried. One person mentioned a poor awareness of vegetarians. Still everybody agreed on the friendliness of the cook!

Participants were extremely happy about the work of the translators and about the excellent reception service.

7. Preparation

Most participants got enough clear information before coming to the study session. But some people didn't get any personal mailing at all or they didn't receive a confirmation on their participation. Also some people did not have any idea of the fact that they would have to write their own project to take and carry out home. Finally, some background articles a few weeks before the study session would have been nice.

8. Suggestions for future topics

- YWCA and YMCA: what do they have in common? what is different?
- How can we increase women's role in society?
- YWCA and environmental issues/ Women and sustainable development
- Violence against young girls in African countries (old traditions)
- Women in leading positions (politics, science, etc.): how to get there and how to handle it?
- Women in the past and present time
- Women and world peace
- Women in conflict situations
- Self esteem and body image among women and young girls
- Women and sexual rights
- Women and human rights
- World YWCA Study session
- Funding

ANNEXES:

4.List of people involved

World YWCA:

Fukushima, Yuriko
Söderlund, Carina

YWCA Albania:

Bojaxhi, Nertila
Mullahi, Anila

YWCA Belarus:

Maibarada, Irina
Yakusheva, Iiudmila

YWCA Belgium:

De Graeve, Mien (Team member)
Dias Pinto, Maria de Nazaré

YWCA Bulgaria:

Haralampieva, Tsvetelina

YWCA Estonia:

Sogenbits, Thea

YWCA Finland:

Lepojärvi Johanna
October Martta (Course Director)
Råberg Catharina

YWCA Germany:

Gentner, Melanie
Sprenger, Uta

YWCA Georgia:

Nikoleishvili, Khatia
Peikrishvili, Nino

YWCA/YMCA Latvia:

Elksne, Ginta
Kozlovska, Marika

Educational Advisor: Elizabeth Kasa

Laising Educational Advisors, Council of Europe: Marta Medlinska & Florian Cescon

Programme Director, European YWCA: Natallia Alexandrovich

YWCA Great Britain:

Barnett, Sarah

YWCA Iceland:

Guonadottir, Lilja
Smith, Halla

YWCA Palestine

Husary, Rasha

YWCA Poland:

Makowska, Marta
Olsztyn, Anna

YWCA Romania:

Iliesi, Ionela
Popescu, Raluca Iuliana
Ungureanu, Anca Roxana

YWCA Sweden:

Pihlgren, Malin
Wallander, Mika

YWCA Switzerland:

Mani, Sibylle (Team Member)

YWCA Ukraine

Titishova, Svetlana
Vidasova, Yuliya

