SPECIAL FEATURE
One Sister’s mission to prevent FGM

PLUS Hope and Collaboration in Australia
ABOUT US
Mary Ward International Australia is a registered charity and is the Australian and global development organisation of the Loreto Sisters. Our Mission is to support the development works associated with the Loreto Sisters and their colleagues as they empower women to transform structures and systems that keep them oppressed and marginalised.

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Welcome to Sustain

There is no subject of greater importance... as that of women’s education – Mother Gonzaga Barry

As followers of Mary Ward you know that she wanted to provide girls and young women with equal opportunities to receive an education and we are all committed to this mission. We live in hope that one day this will be a reality in all countries.

In this edition of Sustain I am pleased to share with you the work that the Loreto Sisters and their colleagues are undertaking every day. There is an update on the success of Sr Ephigenia Gachiri’s ibvm inspirational crusade which has resulted in the opening of the Loreto Abundant Life Centre in Kenya, a facility aimed to support communities for years to come. This will support her campaign to end Female Genital Mutilation and enable the Rite of Passage mode.

Love can be seen on every page, across countries and continents, each bringing to life the hardships and successes that our Sisters experience every day. You will be moved by the words written by an honest volunteer as she provides an insight into the lives of the people living in Timor-Leste. Volunteer, Suzanne O’Connor’s gracious offer to commit to a year-long placement teaching young women English, is a true example of love in action.

MWIA is proud to feature two new indigenous projects which we are supporting in collaboration with long term partners of the Loreto Sisters, Jesuit Social Services and CatholicCare. Through the strengthening of male leadership these innovative Australian projects are vital to improving the safety, well-being and long-term educational outcomes of indigenous communities.

I hope you enjoy these stories and the beautiful photos of these actions of love. For us to continue to help the Loreto Sisters with their good work, we cannot do this on our own, so please consider giving a gift of hope and love to those in the greatest need in Australia and throughout remote communities across the globe.

Donations made to MWIA for Australian and overseas projects are fully tax deductible. Together we will be Mary Ward’s agents of change, bringing hope and opportunities to improve the lives of thousands of women and children.

Warmly,
Kim Nass

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Having just returned from the 2019 Mary Ward Pilgrimage, my commitment to enable change has never been greater. Being immersed in Mary Ward’s story, travelling with fellow Loreto pilgrims, Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Companions of Jesus, gave me a richer and deeper understanding of Mary Ward’s faith and trust in Jesus. Mary remained committed to her true mission, despite being thwarted by the Church until the end of her life. To this day, it is Mary Ward’s hope and love that live on in the women and men, who continue her vision to see a better world for all.

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Warmly,
Kim Nass
Australia:
- Bourke Men’s Centre
- Eliminating Forced Marriage with Education
- Safe Men: Safe Community

Timor-Leste:
- Loreto Centre Gari-urai

The Philippines:
- Balay Banaag - Life Skills for Change

India:
- Collective Voices Project
- Sukna Jute Project
- Panighatta Sewing Project
- Brickfield Schools

Kenya:
- Nyumbani Scholarships
- Mary Ward Retreat Centre Sustainability Project
- Prevention of Female Genital Mutilation

Vietnam:
- John XXIII Teacher Training Scholarship
- IBVM Hostel Scholarships
- Vietnamese Children’s Library
- Mother & Children Project

Zambia:
- Lukulu Teacher Training - extended
- Vehicle Support for Health
- Community School Support
- Baby Milk Project

MWIA Projects Distributions 2018-2019

- Australia: $103,002
- India: $78,754
- Kenya: $50,988
- The Philippines: $20,000
- Timor-Leste: $10,000
- Vietnam: $16,900
- Zambia: $45,799
Project Update: Australia

HOPE & COLLABORATION

SAFE MEN: SAFE COMMUNITY PROJECT

In partnership with Jesuit Social Services

Despite considerable investment from all levels of government, many indicators show that outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are not improving and there is still a considerable way to go to achieve the Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) intention to ‘close the gap’ in “Indigenous Disadvantage”.

MWIA is pleased to partner with Jesuit Social Services (JSS) which is committed to shining a light on issues of injustice, including the high incarceration rates of young Aboriginal people, and putting forward alternative options that divert young people away from the justice system. Strengthening the voices and sharing the experiences of local Aboriginal people is an enduring strategy that both MWIA and JSS are committed to upholding.

The JSS approach to community development is based on a fundamental belief that the community itself can develop its own problem solving and effort sustaining capacities. In the Northern Territory, the approach has been grass-roots - relational in nature, informed by a deep respect for Aboriginal sovereignty, knowledge and cultural beliefs, including practices which are important for promoting positive cultural identity, as well as social and emotional well-being for Aboriginal Australians.

In partnership with Tjungurrayi Council Inc - a local Aboriginal agency established to support a group of local Aboriginal men who live in Town Camps in Alice Springs, the Safe Men: Safe Community Project aims to:

- Strengthen social and cultural connection, a sense of belonging and purpose among Aboriginal men, their families and their communities.
- Build Aboriginal leadership and foster respectful relationships.
- Build new skills, a sense of achievement and increased self-esteem among the men.
- Reduce the level and severity of anti-social behaviour in Town Camps.
- Enhance community safety for families and children.

Images:
1 & 3. Men gather to connect and provide support to one another as part of the Bourke Men’s Centre Project.
2. The community celebrated the opening of the Bourke Men’s Centre.
4. As part of the work preparation offered through the Bourke Men’s Centre Project participants were able to attend a TAFE course.

BOURKE MEN’S CENTRE PROJECT

In partnership with CatholicCare - Employment of the Men’s Space Coordinator

The Bourke Men’s Centre was born as a result of the Manage your Income - Manage your Life Project (MYI Consultation Project) which MWIA funded last year. The project aimed to grow the capacity of Aboriginal leaders by assisting them to design, develop and deliver consultation projects in their local communities. With over 31 percent of the Bourke population identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, the MYI Consultation Project highlighted that Aboriginal men in the community fell into three categories:

- The engaged who are employed and involved in community.
- The disengaged who are unemployed and disconnected.
- Men ‘on the fringes’ who are at risk of disengagement.

The Bourke Men’s Centre Project has an emphasis on men who are disengaged or at risk of disengagement. It is estimated that up to 100 men will directly benefit from this project. The project is driven by the men themselves which gives them ownership of the activities that are provided.

Because of their participation in a range of activities offered, the men will gain a sense of connection, build trust and feel safe to unhook issues impacting them and their families and engage in individual and group-based activities working towards change and healing.

This will be reflected in tangible outcomes such as making healthier choices, responding differently to challenging situations by applying stress management practices, having improved relationships with their families and embracing leadership roles.

By becoming part of a volunteer network, which will be managed by the MWIA funded Centre Coordinator, the men will be able to apply their skills and increasingly gain ownership of the project.

These Australian projects are vital to improving the safety, well-being and long-term educational outcomes of the communities through the strengthening of male leadership. With the right support and guidance breaking the cycle of disadvantage is possible.
Choosing THE PATH less travelled

A renowned educator turned activist, Sr Ephigenia Gachiri ibvm has dedicated much of her life to the fight against the harmful practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) otherwise known as the silent ‘killer of joy’. She has made such a considerable impact in the way FGM is understood both locally and abroad that she was recently featured in The Tablet as one of the Top 50 Minds that Matter.

Since 1998 Sr Ephigenia has darted across the country in her ute bringing messages of hope to the most remote and disadvantaged corners of Kenya. Through years of community consultation she has taken a two-pronged approach to combating this age-old issue, not only by educating parents, teachers and the girls themselves about the dangers of “cutting”, but also by providing an alternative ceremony to help the girls gain the cultural maturity that the FGM ceremony provides without undergoing mutilation.

Fast forward 21 years since Sr Ephigenia started on this crusade. Her tireless commitment is nothing short of inspirational. As a result, on 2 March 2019, the Loreto Abundant Life Centre was officially opened. The Abundant Life Centre is the ultimate product born of Sr Ephigenia’s tireless campaigning to end FGM by providing alternative solutions to this harmful practice.

The centre serves the following purposes:

1. National training of campaigners across Kenya to work in the villages as facilitators for the Rite of Passage for girls (as an alternative to FGM) and for boys (as a replacement for outdated traditional male circumcision rituals).
2. Offer psychological and spiritual healing for traumatised FGM survivors and their families.
3. Conduct research on the root causes of FGM, followed by the dissemination of these findings.
4. Produce and translate FGM campaign tools such as books, calendars, DVDs, teaching manuals and pamphlets.
5. Become a National Resource Centre for FGM related matters.

Images:
1. Sr Anne Kelly ibvm and Sr Ephigenia Gachiri ibvm standing in front of the Abundant Life Centre, Kenya.
2. IBVM Generale Leader, Noelle Corscadden ibvm opening the Abundant Life Centre earlier this year.
3. Official plaque of recognition at the Abundant Life Centre.
4. Sr Ephigenia Gachiri ibvm standing in front of her ute.
5-7. Young girls and boys who participated in the Rite of Passage which provides an alternative to FGM and male circumcision rituals.

The Early Years

Ephigenia grew up in a village during the State of Emergency in Kenya in the 1950s and early 1960s. Her mother was a Loreto past student and teacher, and her father a civil servant. Sr Ephigenia recalls, “Women were the worst hit by poverty, disease and famine. I witnessed many diseases and useless deaths, especially of young children, that could have been avoided by basic knowledge of hygiene and adoption of a proper diet.”

Her parents sent Ephigenia to Loreto Limuru High School, where her vocation was nurtured to help women and girls lift themselves out of oppressive conditions through education. In February 1965 Ephigenia joined the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM) and was one of the first two Africans to take this step.

Sr Ephigenia trained at the Kenya Science Teachers College in Nairobi, obtained a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Calcutta in India, a Master of Arts at Birmingham University in England and a PhD at Kenyatta University, Kenya. In 1995 she represented religious sisters at the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Learning about the horror and global scale of FGM on that occasion changed her life dramatically. The sheer numbers of survivors (over 200 million today) moved her to take immediate action.

The Courage to Act

Over the last 20 years Sr Ephigenia has spent hundreds of hours seated on dusty floors or low wooden stools in people’s homes, openly and patiently listening to dialogue from the community elders, family, friends and female cutters about the tradition of cutting.

It was through community consultation and collaboration that Sr Ephigenia garnered as much insight into this cultural practice as she could before deciding to write her first book (now one of four) and turn her passion into much needed activism.

Cause for Recognition

Her total commitment to this vitally important social justice issue is nothing short of inspirational. Former IBVM Representative at the UN, Sr Anne Kelly ibvm says of her:

‘I know who has stuck with the difficult issue of FGM, year in and year out, despite all sorts of disappointments and setbacks.’

What is FGM?

• According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), female genital mutilation is defined as any procedure that alters female genital organs for non-medical reasons. Cultural reasons for FGM include preserving a girl’s virginity, controlling her sexuality so she will not cheat on her husband, and promoting characteristics like obedience and passivity.
• More than 150 million girls and women alive today have undergone ceremonial cutting in the 29 countries where it is practised, mostly in Africa and parts of the Arab world. The WHO reports that there are approximately two to three million women who undergo the mutilation in Africa every year, or at least 6,000 per day.

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WHAT IS FGM?
At the end of 2018, I retired after having taught English and Religious Studies in a range of schools for fifty years. At the beginning of this year, I began teaching in Timor-Leste - more specifically in Baucau, the second biggest centre in the country. I am teaching English to two classes of young women some of whom may continue to the Loreto novitiate in the Philippines in 2020.

There are many challenges in Timor-Leste. For example, it is only nineteen years since the bitter war against the occupying Indonesian Army finished. By the end of the occupation, about 300,000 civilians had been killed. In a population of little over a million, almost every family was directly affected. It is the opinion of many of us that the people are still enduring the post-war trauma in many ways. As our students are at least twenty years of age and some are twenty-five, they have memories of the starvation and violence that occurred. These memories can affect cognitive capacity.

The education system is strongly influenced by the twenty-five years of Indonesian occupation. English teaching has consisted of a lot of copying down of written work with some comprehension exercises but almost no experience of speaking or of listening to English.

As the accompanying photograph shows (image 5), the classroom is an open veranda. What the photo does not show is the ocean populated by saltwater crocodiles, some apparently swam over from Darwin, and a garden with pomegranate, custard apple, and tamarind trees, as well as a curry leaf bush. The sound effects are provided by the resident pig, a range of goats, a goofy guard dog called Tigger and lots of poultry.

The students’ knowledge of the outside world is minimal: they have little access to books, the nearest cinema is a four-hour drive away, there is no library in Baucau and the internet can be erratic. The country is about 95 percent Catholic, with the church being an important part of society and politics. It can sometimes resolve conflicts within the government persuading it to allow some funds to be released for teachers, police officers and public servants. According to the Timorese Ministry of Finance, about 42 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and about 35 percent have no access to electricity.

In 2013, I volunteered with Mary Ward International Australia for three months with one of those months being spent in the Rainbow Schools in Sealdah, Kolkata India. Obviously, that was a considerable challenge but my current placement is much more confronting. So, would I recommend it to other potential volunteers?

Unequivocally, yes.

Despite this history and the current situation, life here can be addictive. The Timorese have retained the capacity to enjoy the moment with relish. When I fold myself into three to enter a mikrolette, there is a general chuckle as I prove my ability to amuse by being a clumsy giant and hitting my head on the roof of the bus as I try to unfold myself. The day I sat on an unfortunate passenger is still remembered with great glee.

I have been here only a few months and I am learning so much – not all of it well, especially Tetum. I am learning how few possessions are really needed, how a less cluttered life is a better life, how so much we take for granted in Australia is simply not present and one adjusts. There are heroic people here - volunteers from Australia and New Zealand, Brazil and Zimbabwe who refuse to surrender to a stifling bureaucracy which could have been created by Kafka. These people and many Timorese work patiently over years to bring about genuine, permanent change. These people are a daily inspiration, demonstrating a compassion and practicality that sets an excellent standard for those newbies who follow in their footsteps.

Love cannot remain by itself - it has no meaning. Love has to be put into action and that action is service.”

- Mother Teresa

Volunteering in Timor-Leste

Suzanne O’Connor has dedicated a year to volunteer with the Loreto Sisters in Timor-Leste. Below Suzanne writes about her remarkable experience so far.

Volunteering... 

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Images:
1. The local church in Gari-uai where the Sisters reside and manage the Loreto Pre-Primary School and Community Development Centre.
2. Local man with his prized rooster.
3-4. A grandmother and child from Gari-uai.
5. Volunteer Suzanne O’Connor teaching English to young women in Baucau.
Encouraged by the 2014 General Congregation Calls and the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the Loreto Sisters at the Mary Ward Retreat Centre in Nairobi are moving towards sustainability and eco-friendliness, as they strive to “live sustainably, discerning what is enough.”

The decision to cultivate and harvest their fresh produce, which includes an array of vegetables, meat and poultry, means that the Mary Ward Retreat Centre is building its self-sustainability while at the same time providing employment and training opportunities for 20 casual workers. The produce from the garden feeds over 270 guests every month and provides a new revenue stream through the sale of some of this produce.

Not only have the casual workers been offered new employment opportunities, they have also been given skills-training in sustainable agriculture and environmental conservation. Staff are, for example, trained by an agronomist to manage and run the greenhouse. They are already applying these newly acquired skills and are excited to be part of the project.

The Loreto Sisters have welcomed the positive feedback on the quality of the fresh vegetables, milk, eggs and chicken, with many guests buying the produce when they attend workshops at the centre.

Recently 25 Loreto Sisters from around the world, who hold diverse leadership positions in their own countries, gathered at the Mary Ward Retreat Centre for two and a half weeks to learn from one another and set future directions for the congregation. Enjoying the fresh produce from the Centre’s small farm, they witnessed firsthand the benefits of this sustainable and enterprising project.

Community building and sustainability is what drives and defines this important project. It is one small way the Loreto Sisters, and the wider international Loreto community, move towards environmental sustainability propelled forward by the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. We commit ourselves to actions aimed at positively transforming the people of the world, our planet and for our common well-being. Hope resides in our capacity to reimagine a different more sustainable future, simultaneously, patiently and radically, in the midst of global uncertainties.

MWIA is grateful for financial support provided by Missio München towards this project during 2018 and 2019.
Australian Loreto Sister Elizabeth Donnan ibvm has been working in the remote and impoverished region of Lukulu in Zambia for the past 14 years. This part of the country is so difficult to access that it has very few government schools, let alone trained teachers, so the rural communities are left to fend for themselves as best they can. Sr Elizabeth helps local village communities improve their educational capacity by the upgrading of facilities and providing desks and equipment.

It is incredible that something as simple as a desk is a reason for children to want to go to school. The overall success of the Community School Project depends heavily on voluntary school teachers.

The reaction of the students was one of delight. We arrived unannounced at the school and the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) was one of appreciation. The classrooms in this school are a joy to behold with ‘talking walls’ as they call the hand drawn posters surrounding villages to express their appreciation. The classrooms in this school are a joy to behold with ‘talking walls’ as they call the hand drawn posters on flip chart sheets provided by Loreto.

Different patterns of reed weaving, also were taught by the Loreto women who are nuns. The students accepted the reeds and created beautifully decorated hats. The parents of the students were very proud of their children’s creativity and insight. Owl feathers were also provided to the students to decorate their hats.

The classrooms are now equipped with desks, and the students are thrilled as they no longer have to carry stools. They have real desks on which they can write in relative comfort. The staff are pleased as they now have three functional classrooms for their eight classes of 250 children.

Chimbanda Community School

Chimbanda Community School received fifteen desks for a new but incomplete permanent-structure classroom. Loreto insisted that the classroom should have a door, and a lockable one at that. The students are thrilled as they no longer have to carry stools. They have real desks on which they can write in relative comfort. The staff are pleased as they now have three functional classrooms for their eight classes of 250 children.

AN UPDATE BY SR ELIZABETH DONNAN IBVM:

Libingi Community School

Libingi Community school received sixteen desks which have been distributed between three classrooms. The head teacher said the students had been sitting on the floor but now feel that going to school has something different to offer in the form of these desks – Not like home where they also sit on the floor.

Likona Community School

Likona Community School received eleven desks in the most recent desk project. The reaction of the students and the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) was one of delight. We arrived unannounced at the school and members of the PTA came from the surrounding villages to express their appreciation. The classrooms in this school are a joy to behold with ‘talking walls’ as they call the hand drawn posters on flip chart sheets provided by Loreto.

Different patterns of reed weaving, also were taught by the Loreto women who are nuns. The students accepted the reeds and created beautifully decorated hats. The parents of the students were very proud of their children’s creativity and insight. Owl feathers were also provided to the students to decorate their hats.

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MWIA’s provision of educational support for Community Schools in the Lukulu and Mitete Districts works towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4: To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all.

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ACCOUNTABILITY AND ACCREDITATION

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MWIA acknowledges the traditional custodians of this country and offer our respect to the elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal Australia.

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Provide something more than ordinary...
- Mary Ward

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