



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
6 December 2013

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-eighth session

10-21 March 2014

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Catholics for Choice, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution [1996/31](#).



Statement

Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls: a Catholic perspective

Background

Catholics for Choice shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being and respect and affirm the capacity of women and men to make moral decisions about their lives. Through discourse, education and advocacy, Catholics for Choice works with pro-choice Catholics in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe, and with policymakers and advocates around the world who share our goals.

Introduction

The economic and human development of women and girls is of great concern to Catholics everywhere. We recognize that women and girls remain disproportionately impoverished, lack access to educational and other opportunities and are otherwise marginalized at higher rates than men. Our religious tradition instructs us to exercise a preferential option for the poor and to respect the dignity of all.

Catholics are on the front lines of advocacy for the rights of women and girls, while also providing them with critical aid, support and services. We regret, however, that the hierarchy of our Church has instituted protocols in Catholic-run institutions that hinder the full realization of the Millennium Development Goals. These protocols are based upon the most orthodox possible interpretation of Catholic teachings on gender, sexual and reproductive issues, one that is substantially more conservative than that espoused by most Catholics.

Time and again, representatives of the Catholic hierarchy have used the United Nations as a forum to derail progress on development policies directly affecting women and girls. This hostile approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights ignores overwhelming support by Catholics and non-Catholics alike for these international standards, which were adopted by 179 nations at the International Conference on Population and Development and have been affirmed by the overwhelming majority of Member States. The Catholic hierarchy's representatives at the United Nations have worked to stymie advances on reproductive health and rights, efforts that stand in stark contrast to policies embraced by the global community and the beliefs of a majority of the world's 1 billion Catholics.

Millennium Development Goal 5 — Improve maternal health

Globally, the lack of access to family planning methods and information is responsible for many poor maternal health outcomes. The United Nations estimates that satisfying the unmet need for family planning could cut the number of maternal deaths by almost a third. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), at least 200 million women globally want to use family planning methods, but they cannot do so because they lack access to the necessary information and services.

Women who approach a health-care centre managed or funded by the Catholic hierarchy are denied access to the wide array of modern family planning options. According to the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, Catholic institutions manage 26 per cent of health-care facilities globally, or 117,000 health-care facilities and 18,000 pharmacies. Consequently, many women face barriers to obtaining the family planning methods they need. Furthermore, because of the Catholic hierarchy's directives, those who become pregnant as a result of sexual assault may not terminate a pregnancy safely in a Catholic institution, and they are frequently also denied emergency contraception.

The realization of Millennium Development Goal 5, target 5.A, to reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio, has been hampered by the high incidence of unsafe abortion. The Guttmacher Institute estimates that globally, complications from unsafe abortion account for 13 per cent of maternal deaths. The overwhelming majority of these deaths are preventable, as evidenced by the low indices of maternal death from unsafe abortion in developed countries; it is overwhelmingly poor women in developing countries who die because of such complications. The current position of the Catholic hierarchy is to oppose abortion during all stages of pregnancy and for any reason, even when necessary to save a woman's life. Lobbying efforts by the Catholic hierarchy at the United Nations and elsewhere have hindered efforts to improve access to safe abortion services and, therefore, to decrease maternal mortality rates, especially in Africa and Latin America.

Finally, the Catholic hierarchy's practice of privileging the conscience of health-care providers over the needs of patients leaves many women and girls without access to family planning services. Medical personnel who disagree with the provision of certain services are permitted not to provide them, even in crisis situations. This happens in Catholic, as well as in public health-care facilities. In contrast to the relatively small number of people who comprise the hierarchy of our Church, many more Catholics disagree with privileging a health-care provider's personal beliefs over the needs of a patient. Such privileging contradicts Catholic teaching regarding respect for the individual conscience and compassion for others. Furthermore, providers who would willingly perform services prohibited by the Vatican cannot follow their own conscience owing to these policies.

Millennium Development Goal 6 — Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately half of the 40 million people living with HIV are women, and globally women are now being infected at a higher rate than men. Fifty-seven per cent of those living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa are women, with young women at greatest risk.

Catholic-affiliated organizations constitute the largest percentage of providers of care to HIV and AIDS patients, with one quarter of HIV and AIDS care globally being provided by Catholic organizations and facilities. The Catholic hierarchy's official policy, which refuses to accept the use of condoms to fight HIV and AIDS, places women and girls further at risk of becoming infected. Catholic officials have repeatedly spread misinformation about the safety and efficacy of condoms, and Catholic health-care workers are prohibited from distributing condoms or encouraging their use.

In stark contrast to the position of the Catholic hierarchy, Catholics around the world support the use of condoms to prevent HIV. When 4,465 Catholics in Ghana, Ireland, Mexico, the Philippines and the United States of America were polled by the independent research firm Belden Russonello and Stewart in 2007, 60 per cent or more in each country replied “yes” when asked whether they thought Government-funded Catholic hospitals and clinics should be required to include condoms in HIV prevention. Furthermore, majorities of Catholics polled in all countries agreed that “using condoms is pro-life because it helps save lives by preventing the spread of AIDS”, including 90 per cent of those polled in Mexico and 86 per cent of those in Ireland.

Even Pope Benedict XVI has expressed disagreement with an entirely restrictive position on condoms. On 20 November 2010, when asked whether the use of condoms could be acceptable, the *Telegraph* (United Kingdom) quoted then-Pope Benedict as answering that, “in certain cases, where the intention is to reduce the risk of infection, it can nevertheless be the first step on the way to another, more humane sexuality.” Regrettably, many people, especially women and girls, have yet to benefit from greater access to condoms to protect themselves from HIV infection because in practice, the Catholic hierarchy’s attitude towards condoms remains unchanged. As a result, women and girls who depend on Catholic institutions for their health care are denied access to and information about condoms and their use in preventing HIV transmission, except in cases in which health workers decide to break the rules.

Considering that during 2012, 1.6 million people died of AIDS-related causes and 2.3 million people were newly infected, the Catholic hierarchy’s continued prohibition on condoms is unconscionable. Every year, Catholic groups that prohibit condoms receive hundreds of millions of dollars, euros and other public monies to provide services, often in areas where there is no other health-care provider. Women and girls living in these areas have little option but to forgo one of the most effective, evidence-based tools to prevent HIV infection. The Catholic hierarchy’s refusal to acknowledge the merits of condoms for HIV prevention represents a serious impediment to the achievement of Millennium Development Goal 6 for women and girls.

Conclusion

Access to comprehensive reproductive and sexual health care is vital to the health and human rights of women and girls. For decades, the United Nations has worked to improve maternal health and to combat HIV and AIDS. Regrettably, these efforts have been hindered by the Catholic hierarchy’s ideologically driven opposition to good public health practices. It is the responsibility of the United Nations and of Member States to enact and implement the appropriate legal and policy frameworks so that women and girls may enjoy the full range of human rights. In the context of the review of the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, Catholics for Choice calls on all parties in the United Nations system to recognize the damage caused to women and girls by the Catholic hierarchy’s resistance to the full realization of sexual and reproductive rights. We further call on the United Nations to reject any additional influence wielded by the Catholic hierarchy and its affiliated organizations that would limit access to these critical, life-saving services.