



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
9 November 2016

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-first session

13-24 March 2017

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Priests for Life, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Priests for Life believes that the changing world of work provides new opportunities for women's economic empowerment and ways for women to participate in the workforce that can lead to improvements in their lives and that of their families.

While women's economic contributions are on the rise globally, women need to continue to be empowered to be active participants in the changing world of work and in society. The economic challenges for women vary by country and region with women in least developed countries continuing to be most affected by extreme poverty and burdened with long work hours including time spent collecting water, gathering fuel and preparing food.

Women's economic empowerment depends on access to health care, nutrition, education, job training, technology, improvements to the safety of where women work and the conditions under which they work, and economic and financial opportunities. The changing world of work with flexible work schedules and telecommuting potential provides women with new opportunities.

The changing world of work, most critically, has the ability to diminish and eventually eliminate the prevailing discrimination against maternity, motherhood and parenting that remain major roadblocks to women's economic empowerment.

Discrimination against mothers in the workforce remains pervasive in many countries despite the entreaty in paragraph 29 of the Beijing Platform for Action that includes: "Maternity, motherhood, parenting and the role of women in procreation must not be a basis for discrimination nor restrict the full participation of women in society."

For women to fully participate in society their unique procreative capacity needs to be affirmed and they should not be made to feel second class to men and penalized in the labour market including by unequal wages for equal work and lack of professional advancement. Negative attitudes toward pregnancy and motherhood that result in the "motherhood pay penalty", where working mothers with dependent children earn on the average less than women in comparable positions without young children, must change.

Anti-motherhood stigma continues to exist despite validation of the critical role of motherhood in a country's well-being demonstrated by present demographic challenges in an increasing number of countries around the world resulting from low fertility rates.

The 2014 report "Abortion laws and other reproductive rights policies and data around the world" by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat documents the dramatic decline in fertility, "... the number of countries with total fertility below the replacement level (2.1 children per woman) has increased from 55 countries in 1990-1995 to 86 countries in 2010-2015."

Empowerment of women as mothers is at a critical juncture around the world. The report reveals the record-setting number of actions to increase birth rates among developed countries: "the percentage of Governments with policies to raise fertility has almost doubled (from 14 per cent in 1996 to 27 per cent in 2013)" while more

than two thirds of Governments in developed regions “had policies to raise fertility”.

It explains that the decline is not limited to developed countries: “Between 1996 and 2013, the percentage of Governments with policies to raise fertility has also increased in developing regions, from 8 per cent in 1996 to 14 per cent in 2013), while the percentage with policies to lower fertility has remained mostly unchanged (56 per cent in 1996 and 57 per cent 2013)” and states, “... the percentage of Governments with policies to raise fertility was highest in Europe (73 per cent).”

The Beijing Platform of Action recognized that “Women make a great contribution to the welfare of the family and to the development of society, which is still not recognized or considered in its full importance.” These invaluable contributions need to be further enabled by the changing world of work. Progress toward women’s empowerment includes essential maternal health care and nutrition before, during and after pregnancy and childbirth to ensure that mothers and their children survive and thrive.

If the principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that “no one is left behind” is to become reality, a transformation is needed to end the prevailing negative view that discriminates not only against mothers and motherhood, but against pregnancy and preborn children and promotes access to abortion as a “reproductive right”, as “reproductive health”, as a “reproductive health service”, as a “reproductive health-care service”, or as “sexual health”.

Access to legal abortion does not have universal support, is not a universally recognized human right, and no treaty at the United Nations includes a so-called “right to abortion”. The sovereign laws of United Nations Member States vary in regards to recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings ranging from constitutional protection of life from the moment of conception to allowing abortion on demand until the moment of birth.

The report “Abortion laws and other reproductive rights policies and data around the world” also reveals that policies on abortion “remain restrictive in many countries”, and “only about one third of countries (36 per cent) permitted abortion for economic or social reasons or on request”, while “only in half of the countries when the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest or in cases of foetal impairment.”

An overwhelming majority of countries do not consider access to abortion on demand necessary for women’s empowerment. They believe that abortion is an act of violence that denies a unique human being her or his most basic human right — the right to life.

They believe that abortion discriminates against the youngest and most vulnerable human beings and in the case of sex selection abortion identifies and marks unborn baby girls for elimination.

Abortion is considered deadly violence against unborn children. Abortion also causes physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual damage to women who experience the procedure and men who participate in the death of their unborn children. Self-destructive behaviours and actions are common after abortion. Our post-abortion healing ministry, Rachel’s Vineyard, helps post-abortive women and

men in over 70 countries grieve the traumatic loss of their children (a key feature of post-abortion recovery) and find emotional and spiritual healing.

Religious beliefs and cultural values in a majority of countries view abortion as a violation of fundamental human dignity. Abortion is considered cruel and inhuman. In the early stages of pregnancy abortion methods dismember the unborn child or forcibly expel him or her from the womb.

Attempts to include this violent act as a component of women's empowerment destroys consensus and impedes progress.

Attention needs to be focused on tangible assistance to women living in extreme poverty who are least likely to benefit from the changing world of work. Poverty will not end by eliminating the children of the poor but by sustainable development that "leaves no one behind", including children in the womb.

The Beijing Platform also recognized that "Women play a critical role in the family. The family is the basic unit of society and as such should be strengthened. It is entitled to receive comprehensive protection and support ... Women make a great contribution to the welfare of the family and to the development of society, which is still not recognized or considered in its full importance".

Changes in the world of work should help affirm the exceptional and complementary role of women in the family and help to empower them in their vital work that ensures families thrive, which in turn ensures thriving communities and countries.

Women's empowerment depends on recognition of women's equality with men, by men, especially male family members who are key to women's realization of empowerment.

Women were also recognized in the Platform of Action for their important role "in caring for other members of their family." Demographic changes and aging populations have resulted in a greater and more urgent need for this critical work by women that continues to be underappreciated.

Mothers are a powerful influence for good who hold the future of the world in their arms. It is time to fully appreciate and support the world of mothers' work and their vital contributions for family, community and country.

Women's economic empowerment depends on recognition of the valuable role of mothers, motherhood, and parenthood. Anti-motherhood discrimination and stigma in the world of work that denies mothers equal economic empowerment must end if all women are to be economically empowered.

The changes that technology brings to the world of work have the potential to economically empower all women, including mothers.