



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

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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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Priests for Life reminds the Commission on the Status of Women of the pledge of Agenda 2030 that no one will be left behind as it discusses gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes.

Priests for Life recalls the words of Pope Francis writing in *On Care for Our Common Home* that since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. He asks the question, How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?

Priests for Life concurs and believes that women need to be empowered in their universally valued role as mothers and protected from environmental toxins and the dangers of climate change which negatively impact their and their children's health, before and after birth, and contribute to maternal and newborn mortality.

Climate change impacts human beings beginning in the womb and can affect an individual's health and well-being for the rest of her or his life. According to, Catastrophic effects of climate change on children's health start before birth by Dr. Susan Pachero, the fingerprint of climate change on future generations of children begins before they are born, as pregnant mothers endure environmental crises similar to those their children will experience after they are born. Maternal exposure to climate related disruptions, such as floods, droughts, famine, heat extremes, air pollution, and increased infection risk, as well as the stress associated with extreme weather events, disaster, and other environmental crises, can impact the young one at any point during development.

Pregnant women, during climate crises and other disasters, experience stress, respiratory disease, malnutrition, infection, and heat-induced illness which can lead to low birth weight at birth and prematurity resulting in the child's increased predisposition to conditions including cognitive deficits, congenital heart diseases, asthma, obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular problems, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism.

A World Bank article asks and answers the question, How can climate change affect the health of unborn babies? It explains that the climate-induced stresses pregnant women endure impact their children in utero leading to lower birth weight and a higher probability of infant mortality with a potential risk of lung disease, heart disease, type II diabetes, lower cognitive abilities, and learning disorders.

Pregnant women need access to life-affirming health care during all crises and disasters that treats both patients in the pregnancy and includes prenatal and postnatal care and assisted childbirth.

Priests for Life is especially concerned with the large number of women and girls around the world who are adversely impacted by exposure to chemicals and hazardous wastes, which lead to developmental disabilities in unborn children and infertility. Women, Chemicals and the SDGs by UN Environment Programme describes how women are disproportionately impacted by exposure to chemicals and wastes while having less access to participation in decision making on waste management.

The report describes, for example, how men collect electronic waste, but women become exposed to the hazardous chemicals when they extract the valuable metals in the devices. Women and men are impacted differently by the chemicals, including

endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs), which result in women suffering impacts on their reproductive system and pregnancy outcomes long after exposure and for some, the damage has occurred before they even reach reproductive age.

WHO raises concerns about the reproductive health impact of ineffective electronic waste management in the report *Children and digital dumpsites E-waste exposure and child health (2021)* stating that the problem is triggering a crisis of e-waste health risks to which millions of children, as well as women of childbearing age, are exposed. It expresses concern that lead and mercury exposure in the first trimester of pregnancy can lead to neurobehavioral development problems, low birth weight, spontaneous abortion, and birth defects.

Women, Chemicals and the SDGs also reports that textile production includes exposure to chemicals causing cancer, endocrine-disrupting chemicals and allergens. Electronics production has been associated with a variety of adverse health outcomes including cancer, reproductive disorders and developmental disability in unborn children and an increased risk for spontaneous abortion in the semiconductor and electronics industry. Both industries employ large numbers of women.

Women and girls who are most at risk from environmental hazards and climate change need to be empowered by education, training, and access to skilled jobs to rise above poverty and the dangerous hazardous environments in which they struggle. They can become agents of change if empowered and treated with equality in decision making.

In addition, Priests for Life raises concern about the world's water supply and the presence of an assortment of chemicals that can impact women's health and empowerment but which have not received the attention needed for change.

A growing body of research around the world has raised concern about the negative impact of hormones excreted into water supplies worldwide, including estrogen from contraceptives and from animals treated with hormones or naturally occurring, that affect human, animal, and fish reproduction and fertility while creating the need for new water treatment systems.

Antibiotics and other drugs present in the water supply have been recognized as a growing health problem. According to the *Global Environment Outlook GEO-6 Summary for Policymaker* by the United Nations Environment Programme, there is growing evidence that human illnesses due to antimicrobial-resistant (AMR) infections may become a major cause of death from infectious diseases worldwide by 2050. It explains that antimicrobial-resistant bacteria are now found in sources of treated drinking water worldwide stemming from antibiotics entering the water cycle through domestic sewage and industrial wastewater disposal, agriculture, livestock rearing, and aquaculture.

Women are at increased risk of exposure to AMR during pregnancy and childbirth, especially in unsanitary settings. Antibiotic resistance leads to higher medical costs, long hospital stays, and increased mortality.

Water supplies are also filled with endocrine-disrupting chemicals which have a long-term impact on unborn children's development and lead to adverse birth outcomes and developmental impacts on the child's central nervous, skeleton, and reproductive systems.

The impact of climate change on pregnant women and on the lives of children in the womb cannot be ignored during CSW discussions. Their cries must be heard and answered with protection, inclusion, and prenatal justice.

Priests for Life implores CSW to address the critical need for action to protect women from hazardous work environments which adversely affect them and their

children's health, born and unborn. The Convention on the Rights of the Child reminds us in the preamble of the need for special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth.

A majority of Member States recognize the inherent procreative ability of women as the bearers of a country's future, its children. Countries representing 1.6 billion people united in a joint statement, Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family, that included a commitment to secure meaningful health development gains for women, to protect life at all stages, and reaffirmed that every human being has the inherent right to life.

They committed to enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant and affirmed that women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources, and political participation as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels.

Priests for Life believes that women and girls deserve a healthy environment that respects, protects, and empowers their procreative ability. The very future of the human family depends on protection and care of all of creation, not the destruction of the weakest and most vulnerable through abortion.

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