

CATHOLIC VOICES IN AFRICA

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Catholic Voices is an international forum that provides a space for progressive Catholic leaders to reflect, research, and participate in national and international discourse on women's human rights, sexuality, and reproductive health. With special attention to values and ethics of the Catholic tradition, Catholic Voices supports public policies and agreements on these issues that promote social justice, respect human dignity and honor the rights of individual conscience.

CATHOLIC VOICES
ON THE
RIGHTS OF WOMEN
IN AFRICA

CHALLENGES FOR
THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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ON THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN AFRICA

CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

In 1995, women from every region of the world gathered in Beijing, China, for the Fourth World Conference on Women, convened by the United Nations. Non-governmental organizations representing women's movements from around the world attended this groundbreaking conference to proclaim women's dignity and worth, and to challenge heads of state to implement policies that would guarantee the human rights of women and girls.

Among the thousands of women present in Beijing were Catholic women from around the world. They affirmed that the Conference and the resulting Platform for Action (PFA) resonate with Catholic social teachings on economic justice and human rights.

This brochure highlights common ground between the PFA and Catholic social teaching in several key areas:

- ◆ Women, poverty and the economy
- ◆ The education and training of women
- ◆ Women and health
- ◆ Violence against women
- ◆ Women and decision-making
- ◆ The human rights of women and the girl-child

While in each of these areas Catholic social teaching often demonstrates a commonality with the PFA, there are still many ways the practice could be improved to be even more consistent with women's vision and hopes. In each of these areas we present recommendations for addressing such challenges to help not only the institutional church, policy makers and governments to advance the human rights of women in Africa and throughout the world. More importantly, the recommendations will inform Catholics and other individuals about what they can do to challenge the church and society to ensure that the human rights of women and girls are realized.

WOMEN, POVERTY AND THE ECONOMY

Women in Africa experience serious economic inequity. Society expects their unpaid labor in areas such as childcare, care for the elderly and the sick, and domestic chores—even walking miles to fetch wood for fuel and water. Women who work outside the home are not exempt from these expectations, and still carry extra burdens in order to meet their economic needs as well as manage household duties.

Due to power relationships in the family where men and their families frequently control household income, many women find themselves economically vulnerable even when they have secure employment. This is aggravated by social-cultural norms that diminish women's status in the family. Furthermore, in single female-headed households, women carry the entire economic burden of providing for the family and maintaining a home.

The Church Responds

- ◆ In recent history, the institutional Roman Catholic church (hereafter the “church” or “Catholic church”) has recognized economic injustices, particularly those in developing countries, and more recently regarding the situation of women.
- ◆ In its report to the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Holy See expressed concern that, “Women carry a greater burden than men of the various effects of economic crises and the consequences of still unsolved economic tensions.... The presence and activity of women are essential at the levels where decisions about economic and social life are made. Together with men, they are the subjects and objects of the whole of socio-economic life.”¹
- ◆ In his 1990 address at Ouagadougou, Pope John Paul II expressed a deep concern for the implications of poverty on the economic rights of people in Africa: “In the land of Africa, millions of men, women and children are threatened with never enjoying good health, with never being able to live with dignity from their work, with never receiving the education which will develop their minds,

with seeing their environment become hostile and sterile, with losing the wealth of their ancestral patrimony, all the while being deprived of the positive supports of science and technology. In the name of justice, the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter, implores his brothers and sisters . . . not to deny them the universal right to human dignity and a secure life.”²

Recommendations for the Church:

- ◆ The “feminization of poverty” is a problem in both society and the church. Women’s work in the church is often voluntary and unpaid, and yet the church still expects donations from these women. The church should recognize and reform structural ways and practices that perpetuate the feminization of poverty.
- ◆ The church should provide just compensation for women’s work in the church.
- ◆ The church should provide opportunities that enable women to put their abilities to use in order to participate in their own development and in that of the church and society.

Recommendations for Society:

- ◆ Policy makers should create and institute policies that will expand and increase employment opportunities and income for women workers in the formal and informal sectors.
- ◆ Policy makers and women’s groups should advocate choices for women so that women are enabled to work at home or outside the home, and not only be able to work on an equal basis as men, but be empowered to do work that is fulfilling and liberating.
- ◆ Policy makers should adhere to the Platform for Action and review, adopt and maintain macroeconomic policies and development strategies that address the needs and efforts of women in poverty.³

**Women in Africa
experience serious
economic inequity.**

EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF WOMEN

Women still do not have equal access to education in most of sub-Saharan Africa. A major contributing factor is the high cost of school fees, books and uniforms for poor families who often choose to invest in education for their sons rather than for their daughters. Attitudes perpetuated in church and society that expect women to be wives and mothers—roles that are thought not to require schooling—contribute to the denial of education to girls, as well as to the high drop out rates for girls who become pregnant. And although government policies ensure that teenage mothers may continue with schooling after delivery, such policies are not enforced and many girls do not return to school.

The Church Responds

- ◆ In 1985, Pope John Paul II recognized the crucial relationship between education and health: “Fostering literacy and basic education is a fundamental service to be rendered to the multitudes of marginalized people. A person who learns to read and then write is better able to understand the importance of hygiene, has greater possibilities of taking care of his [or her] health, knows his or her own rights and duties better, wants to participate, begins to have self-confidence, becomes aware of his [or her] freedom . . . which is his [or hers] by right.”⁴
- ◆ At the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Holy See’s delegation noted that, “It is within the framework of an overall understanding of development, that is to say one aiming not only at economic growth but also the growth of the human person considered in his or her unity, that consideration has been given in the last few decades to the urgent need for basic education, including literacy training, and for a basic formation for all.”⁵

Recommendations for the Church:

- ◆ Catholic women in particular should have access to information about the teachings of the Roman Catholic church that support their human rights. They should also be educated about the church's laws in regard to their rights as Catholics.
- ◆ The church should implement programs to do everything possible to eliminate illiteracy.
- ◆ The church should guarantee at every age a family-life education, which includes education in responsible parenthood.

Recommendations for Society:

- ◆ Policy makers should ensure equal access to education and strive to eradicate illiteracy among women.
- ◆ In addition to basic education, girls need education that empowers and opens them to a variety of opportunities rather than limiting them to traditional roles. Government-run schools and vocational training institutions should incorporate non-discriminatory education and training.
- ◆ Governments and civil society should support and work with local women's rights organizations to ensure that women can access information about their rights and how they can be protected through local and national legislations.

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WOMEN AND HEALTH

As articulated in the Beijing Platform for Action:

Reproductive health implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this . . . condition are the right[s] of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice. . . .⁶

Yet, approximately 500,000 women die each year from pregnancy-related causes, and many times that number suffer illnesses and injuries associated with pregnancy and childbirth. Ninety-nine percent of those deaths occur in developing countries. Whereas only 1 in 3,000 women in developed nations dies from maternal causes, 1 in 19 African women does.⁷

Eighty thousand women die each year from abortion-related causes. Unwanted pregnancies can lead to unsafe abortions, which can lead to severe health impairment and death. Women often are unable to negotiate sex and therefore are unable to insist on condoms for AIDS prevention, effective contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancy, as well as abstinence. Young girls are forced to marry older men and experience early pregnancy. The lack of maternal and child care also contributes to health problems. It is estimated that almost 50 per cent of those living with HIV and AIDS are now women. Women are also increasingly likely to contract the disease. Lack of access to comprehensive sexual education and information increases the vulnerability of women and men to disease and unwanted pregnancy.

The Church Responds

- ◆ “The Holy See advocates continuing improvements in both pre- and postnatal health care for mothers and children, with a view to reducing infant and maternal mortality and improving maternal and child health standards. In the light of the aging of the population . . . greater attention should be given to the provision of

home-based care and self-care for the aged, which will permit them to remain active participants in society in respect of their dignity and rights.”⁸

- ◆ “Coercion of any kind, whether of nations, groups or individual couples, is unacceptable. To infringe upon the freedom of couples to make responsible, moral decisions regarding the spacing and limiting of births is an offence against human dignity and justice.”⁹
- ◆ For couples at risk of unwanted pregnancies or AIDS, the words of the Second Vatican Council are helpful. They taught us that it is right for couples to think about “their own good and the good of their children already born or yet to come, an ability to read the signs of the times and of their own situation on the material and spiritual level, and finally, an estimation of the good of the family, of society, and of the Church. It is the married couples themselves who must in the last analysis arrive at these judgments before God.”¹⁰

Recommendations for the Church:

- ◆ The Catholic church should work with local women’s organizations to incorporate into its life-education programs instruction not only about responsible parenthood, but also on the goodness of sexual pleasure and importance of informed choice.
- ◆ Catholics should be educated on the Catholic church’s teachings on primacy of conscience, mercy and compassion, so they can understand how these apply to women and men faced with personal decisions regarding their reproductive health and lives.
- ◆ The Catholic church and the health care facilities it operates must implement comprehensive health care and education into their teachings, prevention programs, and care and treatment of patients

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so that the people they serve can make informed choices about their health and lives.

- ◆ The church must recognize and address the health impact of unsafe abortion as a major public health issue.

Recommendations for Society:

- ◆ As stated in the objectives of the Platform for Action, governments in collaboration with non-governmental organizations should support and implement measures to increase women's access throughout the life cycle to appropriate, affordable and quality health care, information and related services.¹¹
- ◆ The redistribution of currently unequal power structures in gender relations is crucial to preventing unwanted pregnancies and HIV/AIDS transmission, as well as to ensure a satisfying sex life. Women must be able to negotiate sex in order to avoid disease and pregnancy. Comprehensive sexuality education that empowers girls and women must be made available throughout the continent.
- ◆ A human rights approach is one avenue to improving women's reproductive and sexual health, placing individual suffering in a wider context. African women should learn how their reproductive and sexual rights are protected under the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights and what they can do if their rights are violated.¹²

**Comprehensive sexuality education
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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Women in Africa suffer multiple expressions of violence that have serious effects on their mental and physical health, economic condition, religious and spiritual well-being, and their lives. African women experience rape, incest, harassment, denial of inheritance rights, inhumane funeral rites, FGM (female genital mutilation), virginity tests, polygamy and wife battering—just to name a few.

In March 2001, the *National Catholic Reporter* (USA) reported on the sexual abuse of nuns by Catholic clergy and religious in 23 countries, including countries in Africa. The sexual exploitation and abuse of nuns by priests has resulted in pregnancies: some nuns have been dismissed from their religious orders and live as outcasts from their communities; others have been forced by priests to have abortions and it has been reported that at least one nun in Africa died as a result of such an abortion.

The Church Responds

- ◆ In 2001, Pope John Paul II deplored abuse in the church: “The Synod Fathers condemned all sexual abuse and all forms of abuse of power, both within the church and in society as a whole. Sexual abuse within the church is a profound contradiction of the teaching and witness of Jesus Christ.”¹³
- ◆ In 1968, Pope Paul VI denounced forced sex in marriage in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*: “[it is] rightly observe[d] that a conjugal act imposed on one’s partner without regard to his or her condition or personal and reasonable wishes in the matter, is no true act of love, and therefore offends the moral order.”¹⁴
- ◆ In the 1994 exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II affirmed the “inalienable rights” of every human person and condemned violations of those rights: “The synod deplored those African customs and practices ‘which deprive women of their rights and the respect due to them,’ and asked the church on the continent [of Africa] to make every effort to foster the safeguarding of these rights.”¹⁵

Recommendations for the Church:

- ◆ When local churches and society emphasize women should maintain a submissive and obedient manner, women become vulnerable to violence. Churches and schools should condemn violence and empower women.
- ◆ Catholics must support nuns who are victims of clergy abuse to ensure they are not treated as outcasts in their communities. Cases of abuse should be reported to both church and civil authorities for prosecution and culpable priests must be punished.
- ◆ All religious leaders should give their unqualified support to women who are the victims of violence within their institutions or in other faith groups and speak out against such abuse whether it occurs in their faith or another faith. Respect for the autonomy of other faith groups cannot serve to mute the voice of religious leaders on this grave sin against women.

Recommendations for Society:

- ◆ Policy makers should create and implement legislation that seeks to prevent and eliminate violence against women. In particular, governments and their policy makers should condemn violence against women and denounce and outlaw any custom, religious practice or tradition that perpetuates violence against women.
- ◆ Governments should work in partnership with civil society to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
- ◆ Policy makers and non-governmental organizations should take active measures to eliminate all forms of violence against women; to provide and participate in training and education to promote women's human rights; and to work to dismantle structures of domination that perpetuate violence against women.

Women in Africa suffer multiple expressions of violence that have serious effects on their mental and physical health.

WOMEN IN POWER AND DECISION-MAKING

Although women hold leadership roles in their communities and in non-governmental organizations, women continue to be under-represented at most levels of government. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that every person has a right to take part in his or her government. Similarly, in the 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII recognized the political rights of every person: “The dignity of the human person involves the right to take an active part in public affairs and to contribute one’s part to the common good of the citizens.”¹⁶

As articulated in the 1995 Platform for Action, women’s equal participation in political life is essential for the advancement of women: “Women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women’s perspective[s] at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.”¹⁷

The Church Responds

- ◆ In his 1995 statement, *Women: Teachers of Peace*, Pope John Paul II acknowledged that society benefits from women’s participation in all arenas of society: “The growing presence of women in social, economic and political life at the local, national and international levels is thus a very positive development. Women have a full right to become actively involved in all areas of public life, and this right must be affirmed and guaranteed, also, where necessary, through appropriate legislation.”¹⁸
- ◆ In their National Report for the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Holy See stated that, “Women themselves, by actively participating in every sector of development, make possible a true reciprocity between men and women. It can be seen that more and more women are claiming their place.... Both women and men, together bear responsibility for the future of humanity.”¹⁹

Recommendations for the Church:

- ◆ Although the church advocates the full participation of women in power structures and decision-making processes in secular society, the church does not allocate these rights to women in the church. Catholic women parishioners and associations should challenge the church to apply the standards it holds for secular society to the church.
- ◆ Catholics should advocate for the incorporation of women in the decision-making processes of the church to bring women's voices to the discussion and development of the theology and law of the church, and to influence change from within the church. The church should welcome women as priests and bishops.
- ◆ The church should promote the access of women to positions of responsibility in every sphere of life, including decision-making positions in the church and politics.

Recommendations for Society:

- ◆ Governments and political parties should take measures to ensure that women have equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making processes.
- ◆ Women should build and strengthen solidarity among women and non-governmental organizations through information and education activities.
- ◆ Governments should work in partnership with civil society, especially with women's organizations, to provide leadership and self-esteem trainings, and should encourage women to participate in the electoral process.

**Women continue to be
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levels of government.**

HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND THE GIRL-CHILD

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, declares that, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, adopted in 1981, sets out the right to be free from discrimination. However, women in Africa continue to face discrimination and oppression based solely on the fact that they are women.

Tragically, it is within family life that women’s human rights are most violated. Single mothers head over one third of families in Africa, and a girl-child heads many of those families. Within some family structures, women are viewed as property, accompanying a dowry, and are prevented from expressing their full human rights.

The Church Responds

- ◆ In more recent church documents, the Catholic church strives to promote the human rights of all people. It supports the eradication of situations that are detrimental to the well-being of women. However, the issue of women’s human rights is complicated by the church’s insistent stand against reproductive health and rights and its idealized vision of motherhood. Nonetheless, Catholic teaching does advocate human rights for women.
- ◆ In 1994, Pope John Paul II condemned discrimination against women and the girl-child in Africa: “The Church deplores and condemns, to the extent that they are still found in some African societies, all ‘customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and the respect due to them.’ It is recommended that Episcopal Conferences establish special commissions to study further women’s problems, in cooperation with interested government agencies wherever this is possible.”²⁰
- ◆ To the members of the diplomatic corps in Kenya, Pope John Paul II stated: “The State must reject anything unworthy of the freedom and of the human rights of its people, thus banishing all elements such as abuse of authority, corruption, domination of the weak, the

denial to the people of their right to share in political life and decisions, tyranny or the use of violence and terrorism.”²¹

Recommendations for the Church:

- ◆ All church leaders, including clergy, religious and laity, should work to eliminate discrimination and stigmatization of single mothers. Catholic women’s associations should ensure that single mothers, and their children, are not discriminated against in the church and their communities.
- ◆ Churches should adopt a more inclusive concept of family, embracing the wide variety of families that exist in Africa today. By including multiple types of families in its definition, the church will be taking a stand for the protection and safety of girls and the empowerment of women.
- ◆ Since the Vatican—the Holy See—is a State party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, individual parishes should educate parishioners about the Convention and the rights of children, especially the rights of the girl-child.

Recommendations for Society:

- ◆ Governments should promote and protect the human rights of women through the full implementation of all human rights instruments, especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
- ◆ Policy makers and civil society should work together to achieve legal literacy for women.
- ◆ African women should study the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights to understand their rights and to learn how to use human rights instruments to secure their rights. Any person or group of individuals can submit a communication to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights denouncing a violation of human rights. This is an important and legitimate means for women in Africa to claim their rights.²²

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can reflect on the National Report of the Holy See in Preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women, where the Holy See outlines strategic actions and objectives to which they have already committed themselves, for the future advancement of women's human rights:

- ◆ to strengthen awareness of the dignity of the person and the person's inalienable rights;
- ◆ to enable women to put their abilities to use in order to participate in their own development and in that of society;
- ◆ to ensure a fair balance of workforces in society, by recognizing the importance of family work;
- ◆ to promote the access of women to positions of responsibility in every sphere of life, including politics;
- ◆ to continue the struggle against all forms of poverty, and in particular against unemployment and the marginalization which follows it;
- ◆ to do everything possible to eliminate illiteracy;
- ◆ to guarantee at every age a family-life education that includes education in responsible parenthood.

All Catholic parishes in Africa, and throughout the world, should adopt these strategic actions so that the church plays a role in women's empowerment and advancement in church and society. The church however, will not do this on its own. Voices of Catholic women and men must unite so that the church is compelled to respond to the signs of the times, and thus ensure that women's human rights are upheld and promoted.

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