

## **A submission from Catholics for Choice to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**December 1, 2009**

### **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, CFC works with a global network of prochoice Catholics, including sister organizations throughout Latin America and in Europe, and with policymakers and advocates around the world who share our goals. Catholics for Choice has consultative status at the United Nations through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

CFC supports policymaking and governing structures that make a clear separation between church and state. At the same time, while we recognize that religion can make a positive contribution to law and policymaking, particularly in relation to social justice and the dignity of the human person, we do not think that religious organizations should be granted special status merely because they are religious.

### **Preventable Maternal Mortality and Morbidity as a Human Rights Issue: A Catholic Perspective**

In June 2009, the UN Human Rights Council adopted resolution 11/8, recognizing that "most instances of maternal mortality and morbidity are preventable" and that preventable maternal mortality is a "health, development, and human rights issue." In order to meet the challenges presented by this issue, the Council called for the effective promotion of, inter alia, the human rights of women and girls, including the right to sexual and reproductive health. The Council requested that all States renew their commitments to obligations under the Beijing Platform for Action, ICPD Programme of Action, and the Millennium Development Goals, particularly MDGs 3 and 5. The Council also requested a study on preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights from the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Catholics for Choice is pleased to contribute to that study with this statement.

Catholics for Choice shares the commitment of UNHCR and the High Commissioner's Office to attain the goals of the aforementioned commitments on human rights, particularly the full recognition of the human rights of women and girls. We recognize that maternal mortality can indeed be prevented, and that access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare services meets two important goals: recognizing the human rights of women and girls and reducing the incidence of maternal mortality. When SRHR are not promoted and protected, women and girls cannot effectively avoid unplanned or high-risk pregnancies. These pregnancies themselves can result in maternal mortality and morbidity. In countries where safe abortion is not legal or accessible, the effects of unsafe abortion for women who cannot continue a pregnancy further increases the incidence of maternal mortality and morbidity. An expansion of access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare services, including safe and legal abortion services, is critical to realizing the goals of the UNHRC's resolution and the MDGs.

Unfortunately, one of the biggest obstacles to achieving the goals of Beijing and ICPD, as well as the MDGs, is the Catholic hierarchy's attempts to influence international policymaking and

the service provision of reproductive health services for women and girls. As a Non-member State Permanent Observer at the UN, the Vatican (the government of the Catholic church) has a privileged place over all other world religions. It therefore has the opportunity to unduly influence international policymaking, often undermining the overwhelming international consensus that exists on issues of sexual and reproductive health, which the Vatican fails to adequately recognize as a human right. Simultaneously, the Catholic hierarchy, through the pope and bishops throughout the world, undermines country-level initiatives that aim to achieve the goals of the MDGs, prevent maternal mortality and reduce unsafe abortion.

Catholics for Choice, representing the opinions of the majority of Catholics around the world on these issues, believes that the influence of the Vatican and the bishops around the world must not be allowed to maintain their influence over policymaking as it is detrimental to the health and human rights of women and girls, especially those who are most vulnerable. Two examples illustrate how the Vatican and Catholic bishops seek to weaken the international community's attempts to attaining MDGs 3 and 5.

### **The Maputo Protocol in Cameroon**

On May 28, 2009, just a few months after Pope Benedict XVI visited Yaounde, Cameroon, the Cameroonian government took a strong stand for women's human rights and ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Women (Maputo Protocol). The Protocol provides for the "protection of the reproductive rights of women" with a provision for abortion in limited cases. The Catholic bishops, a powerful force in both local politics and healthcare delivery, condemned the government for its ratification of the Protocol because of its reference to providing safe abortion, a provision that would likely contribute to a reduction in preventable maternal mortality and morbidity.

The Cameroonian bishops claim that the Protocol violates Cameroonian constitutional law because it permits abortion. This is an unfounded claim. In Cameroon, the law states that international instruments, including UN documents, take precedence over domestic laws. In any case, both the Protocol and Cameroon's laws allow for abortion in two cases: when a woman's life is in danger or in the case of rape. For years, the Cameroonian government has ratified many international instruments that protect the human rights of women and reproductive rights, including the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women as well as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The Maputo Protocol is not the first international instrument the Cameroonian government has ratified that protects women's reproductive rights—nor should it be the last.

The Catholics bishops' efforts illustrate their intent to block women's access to the reproductive healthcare services they need to fully realize their human rights, despite governmental and intergovernmental agreements to the contrary. The Cameroonian government must be supported in its efforts to uphold the human rights of women and girls and to follow through on its commitments embodied in the Maputo Protocol.

### **Support for the MDGs**

In September 2005, Catholics for Choice initiated an interfaith religious statement supporting the Millennium Development Goals calling for the recognition of reproductive health and rights as basic human rights. The broad-based statement, "A Faith-filled Commitment to

Development Includes a Commitment to Women's Rights and Reproductive Health: Religious Reflections on the Millennium Development Goals," was focused on the MDGs and poverty eradication, and included a section dedicated to the attainment of MDG 5. The statement garnered widespread support from people of faith who fully supported its principles.

In response to this effort to support the human rights of women and girls, high-ranking Vatican officials instructed Catholic bishops to ensure that "no 'religious leader' of the Catholic church" sign the statement.

Bishops' conferences throughout Latin America warned Catholic leaders against signing the declaration. The Vatican's order included often-repeated misinformation regarding UN support for access to healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare services and mischaracterized the declaration as simply a statement promoting abortion. The memo was leaked to the Latin American press and was widely seen as part of an ongoing effort by the Vatican to eliminate any references to reproductive health in UN documents.

Again, despite not only government consensus, but also consensus among those in faith-based organizations, including many Catholics, the bishops worked to thwart efforts to recognize women's human rights. Their rejection of sexual and reproductive health as part of a woman's overall right to health lays the groundwork for their objections to policies and accessibility of services that are rightly recognized by leaders in faith communities, governments and health organizations as necessary to promoting women's health and preventing maternal mortality and morbidity around the world.

### **Conclusion**

The death of more than 1,500 women a day due to preventable complications before, during and after pregnancy and childbirth is undoubtedly a human rights issue. Our concern is compounded by the fact that maternal mortality is the leading cause of death among women and girls of reproductive age and its effects fall disproportionately on the poor and other vulnerable populations.

Catholics for Choice urges the international community to reaffirm its commitment to the human rights of women and girls, including access to sexual and reproductive health services as integral to their right to health. Governments must be supported in their efforts to realize their commitments to achieving the MDGs, and must be encouraged to withstand pressure from the Vatican and some members of the Catholic hierarchy whose narrow view of women's human rights stands outside international consensus. Catholic people the world over support the human rights of women and girls, and recognize that maternal mortality is preventable. Catholics for Choice commits to continued efforts to support the work of the UNHRC and the many governments and NGOs that are working to better the lives of women and girls around the world, especially those most vulnerable to threats to their rights, health and lives.

CATHOLICS  
FOR  
CHOICE