



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-eighth session

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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 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Established in 1973, Catholics for Choice has worked in the United States and across the world for 50 years to ensure that all people have access to safe and affordable reproductive healthcare services and to infuse the organization's core values into public policy, community life, and Catholic social thinking and teaching. Understanding that reproductive freedom is Catholic social justice value, Catholics for Choice works to dismantle religiously based obstructions to abortion care, contraceptive access and comprehensive health care, particularly because these barriers disproportionately affect people of color, immigrants, the poor, and the most vulnerable. Catholics for Choice supports policymaking and governing structures that make a clear separation between church and state. Through discourse, education and advocacy, the organization works with a global network of pro-choice Catholics, including sister organizations throughout Latin America. Catholics for Choice has consultative status at the United Nations through the Economic and Social Council. These are some of the many things we've done since our founding:

- Recruited over 250 United States legislators, both at the state and federal levels, as part of our Catholics in Public Life program.
- Developed and nurtured strong partnerships with secular and interfaith organizations.
- Hosted hundreds of workshops and trainings in more than 40 countries.
- Supported Ireland in repealing its 8th Amendment, which had effectively banned all abortions, in 2018.
- Worked with Argentinian partners in legalizing abortion up to 14 weeks of pregnancy in 2020.
- Published hundreds of pieces in major media outlets worldwide.
- Testified before U.S. Congress and numerous state legislatures.

As we look back over the last few years, there can be no doubt that great leaps have been made in terms of women's equality in the world, Latin American countries being a great example of this. However, there have also been significant setbacks. For every country where restrictions on abortion have been lifted, there are others that continue to prohibit this life-saving procedure, including, as of 2022, the United States. Contraception is readily available in some regions of the world, while in others access to family planning remains highly limited or stigmatized.

On several occasions, Catholics for Choice has witnessed first-hand the adverse impact the Catholic hierarchy has had on women's rights throughout the world. Unfortunately, the Vatican and the Holy See have been a driving force in setting up obstacles for women. Since 1964, the Holy See has held Permanent Observer status at the United Nations. As the central government of the Roman Catholic Church, the Holy See is the only religious institution that enjoys this status. It maintains full diplomatic relations with 177 countries out of the 193 member countries of the U.N. The Holy See justifies its seat at the United Nations through its claim of having global moral authority. For years, organizations like Catholics for Choice have argued that the Holy See should not hold the status of Permanent Observer and that the United Nations should be a site of secular decision-making. Alternatively, some have asserted that Christianity and Catholicism should not be given preferred religious status to the exclusion of other religious entities.

The active participation of non-governmental organizations is a critical element in the work of the Commission on the Status of Women. They continue to play an

important role in holding international and national leaders accountable for the commitments they make. This year's priority theme goes hand in hand with Catholics for Choice's mission: Serving the pro-choice Catholic majority – encountering people of faith who support reproductive freedom, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing access barriers with a gender perspective. This is why Catholics for Choice has a particularly important role this year as an org non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council: This is our area of expertise. We seek to serve as a voice for the majority of Catholics who support access to comprehensive reproductive care, including abortion. Together, we are building a strong community of advocates to create sound public policy rooted in true religious liberty, social justice, and respect for conscience. Despite the hierarchy's best efforts to convince people otherwise, the truth is that most Catholics are pro-choice. The silence around abortion is remarkable, since, according to a 2019 Pew study, 68% of U.S. Catholics did not want to see *Roe v. Wade* struck down and 56% believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Catholics' reticence to speak about abortion is evidence of the heavy stigma that the Catholic hierarchy, particularly U.S. bishops, have placed on the issue. But Catholics need to start talking about it. The unprecedented bans and restrictions on access to abortion care are the result of a political movement originated and generated by Catholic leaders. We must speak out and tell the hierarchy that they cannot infringe on civil rights in the name of our God and our church. As pro-choice Catholics, it is our responsibility to remind our elected officials and diplomats whom they represent and what we really believe about reproductive freedom. The Holy See is not an expert on Catholic opinion. They are not the only Catholic voices on issues of reproductive health, rights, and justice – this restrictive minority is not louder than our compassionate majority. Representation of the plurality of opinions on abortion among Catholics is important.

Moving forward, we would like to see values that reflect the real needs of people around the world, Catholic and non-Catholic, infused into public policy. Currently the Holy See and members of the Catholic hierarchy are not lifting up these needs in their lobbying efforts. Until such a time when they do, the Commission on the Status of Women and other bodies at the United Nations must remain a strong and unwavering model for women's rights. Catholics for Choice invites others to call on both the Catholic hierarchy and the States Members of the United Nations to recognize the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights, thereby reaffirming women's equal human rights. In conclusion, as the United Nations and its agencies work to secure sexual and reproductive health and rights as a key component of working towards women's full equality, Catholics for Choice commits itself to supporting these efforts through discourse, education, research and advocacy.