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with hearts as wide as the world

Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

Making Known God's Goodness

Volume 1#8

March 2024

MONTH OF MARCH OF MARCH: FOCUS ON WOMEN

Going back to the early 1900s, the month of March has a long history of being associated with a public focus on the struggle for women's rights. In 1977, the UN officially designated March 8th as the International Day of Women. One of the oldest UN Commissions set up in 1947 was that on the Status of Women (CSW), which regularly now meets in March. In many countries (e.g., USA, DRC), March is observed as Women's History Month. All these observances aim to raise awareness about the situation of women and their struggle to attain their basic rights. This issue of SNDatUN Newsletter will include:

- **Summary of some of the work of the CSW in March and the experience of the delegation registered by the SNDatUN NGO Office**
- **A concrete example of the work of an SND in the Congo to support women in their struggle to achieve their basic rights in an African context.**

May these reflections challenge you to consider how you support women in their difficulties and struggles to achieve their aspirations.

SIXTY-EIGHTH COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN (CSW68)



A delegation of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur participated in the 68th Session of the CSW held March 11th to 22nd, 2024. The theme of this year's meeting was **"Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the**

empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing from a gender perspective".

Financial inclusion and empowering women and girls are essential prerequisites for achieving gender equality and for the realization of the 2030 Agenda. At the CSW 68 through conferences, side events, and parallel events, women from all parts of the world explored and shared success stories, individual, collective, and national best practices and strategies applicable to all stages of a woman's life with a view to success (childhood to adulthood and old age). They pointed out how many women face structural obstacles that limit their ability to realize their full potential.

The annual U N meeting brought together governments, civil society organizations, experts, and activists worldwide to agree on actions and investments that could end women's poverty and advance gender equality.

Delegates registered by the SNDatUN Office included students and professors from Trinity University, and Sisters of Notre Dame. They planned and organized a parallel event on March 16th, entitled: **An Intergenerational Panel: Assessing poverty through different lenses"**. Together the Sisters and students shared data and discussed both their views of poverty in America and possible ways for them to work with African women trying to improve their lot and that of their families.

Two participating SNDs shared their reflections about the CSW:

REFLECTION OF SISTER ANN HOWARD, WHO CAME WITH THE STUDENTS FROM TRINITY UNIVERSITY, DC: PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION.



Under the auspices of the SNDatUN NGO Office, I registered to participate in this year's UN CSW68. This gave me the freedom to follow a range of events in the UN building and the Church Center. Panelists shared insights on the reasons why women who are made poor today struggle to support themselves, their families, and their livelihoods. Research reveals that **education** is the key to overcoming poverty and living a life of moral agency throughout the world. The presenters and participants shared about the Caribbean, including

Haiti, the continent of Africa, and the US, At an event sponsored by the NGO Office of the Sisters of Mercy, women spoke against the 'girl-bride' practices in parts of Africa.

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur partnered with the Global Affairs students from Trinity Washington University to organize a webinar with an intergenerational panel addressing **Confronting Poverty Through Diverse Lenses**. The case was made that women and girls experience poverty more often than their male counterparts. Students Karla and Kayla demonstrated through data and first-hand experiences how poverty affects women's health, how if a woman's education is cut short, her prospects for an empowered adult life will be diminished, and how educating young women ensures future happiness and fullness and supports dignity and strength. While women are most vulnerable to the limitations of poverty, education will eventually lead to safety and strength in the lives of women and those they lead. SNDdeN panelist Eucharia Madueke made the case for training, mentoring, and accompanying religious women in Africa. Encouraging them to engage with the structures of injustice that work against the dignity and rights of people, particularly women and children, strengthens their voice and agency in holding their governments accountable for dismantling social and cultural norms and barriers that stand in the way of

women's and girls' progress. Another SNDdeN Marie Josephine Ibanda argued that women need to become aware of their inner strength and ability to fight poverty to escape from its grip on their lives. This highlights the importance of education and awareness-raising programs for women, enabling them to discover and develop their potential in all aspects

of life. Sister Marie Josephine emphasized the significance of women's political and economic empowerment. Reference was made to how organizing rural women into savings and credit solidarity groups is another area that demonstrates what women are capable of when working in associations.

REFLECTIONS SISTER EUCHARIA MADUEKE: PERSPECTIVE OF AN AFRICAN WOMAN

The annual meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the UN's largest annual gathering addressing gender equality and women's empowerment. At first, I was impressed by the diversity of people, particularly that some even came from the continent of Africa. This seemingly inclusive attendance gave me the impression that the UN is beginning to pay attention to the participation of those most affected by women's poverty. It is interesting to note that over 44% of African women live in poverty, considerably greater than in other parts of the world. I am concerned, however, by the lack of diversity. My impression was that the approach was "one cap fits all", with the agenda seemingly set primarily by moneyed people with little or no direct experience of what it means to live in poverty. The discussions focused on women's economic empowerment as a tool for ending poverty. In the events I attended, I looked for the African values of "ubuntu," which include the importance of community, solidarity, sharing, and caring, but I did not see them. Empowerment of African women should not be limited to economic empowerment alone. Serious attention must be given to building women's groups to tackle systemic problems that hinder Africa's way of life. The spirit of Ubuntu is crucial for the sustainable empowerment of women in Africa. I



strongly believe that we need stronger institutions to remove all barriers and obstacles. We need a robust governance system in place for the good of all.

MEN'S POINT OF VUE

Strikingly, a masculine presence at most side events, parallel events, and conferences. Some were panelists. Some of the men seemed to be very involved in women's organizations. This raised the question: why are more and more men active in the CSW, a meeting for women to

reflect on their problems? We wondered what motivated them, men, to come to this session, so we asked them. This is a sampling of the replies.

Olubiyi Oludipe, from Nigeria: “Women's rights are human rights.” Their rights need to be respected, and women should have the opportunity to be in positions of authority and respect simultaneously. Men have dominated the world since the beginning. The time has now come for men to support women because they still have a long way to go.

Another said,” Systemic artificial barriers exist. To address them, there is a need to learn from what works across the globe. For this reason, I support the CSW. As a father of girl-children, it has been my pleasure to work towards improving the social and economic situations where I am. I provide technical support and strategic leadership and direction to my ...to continue supporting gender-based violence survivors. It is an opportunity to learn and find new models.

Yet another remarked, “We understand that when a man struggles for women’s rights, he

liberates himself.”



FIGHT FOR WIDOWS RIGHTS: PERSPECTIVE OF AN AFRICAN SNDdeN

Sr. Chantal Metena, SNDdeN (Congo)



By celebrating March 8 each year, an international day dedicated to the fight for women's rights, we women of the DRC should use the occasion to highlight the need to protect and safeguard not only the rights of all women but, most especially how they are regularly abused in the case of women and children at the death of their husbands/fathers.

This is why, as a woman, a nun, and a lawyer for 17 uninterrupted years, I have made addressing many facets of customs affecting widows a major focus of my work. The society generally tolerates the practices irrespective of the established law. I devote part of my ministry to supporting, advising, and defending widowed women when they fight against the traditional, abusive practices causing the denial of the rights of women following the deaths of their spouses.

Indeed, in my home country of the DRC, in my ministry as a religious lawyer, I am very aware of how little public authorities are concerned about protecting women's rights in general but seem even indifferent to the abuse of the rights of widowed women.

From my experience in the field, these abuses are many, but the most frequent and more revolting ones that I focus on are those that affect the wife during and after the death of the husband. These abuses range from the deprivation of freedom of expression to the widow throughout mourning for her spouse, to the confiscation of property (often houses) acquired by the couple, to their forced marriage with a member of the husband's family, and even to total abandonment.

It is important to point out that these abuses and violations of the rights of widows which render them victims of their deceased husbands' families are not due to the absence of legal texts. Rather they are indicative of the inadequacies and failures of the institutions that are supposed to regulate social behavior.

Exacerbating the situation is that since these practices take place in the family sphere, they are considered private matters which do not admit of any external intervention. The abused women feel themselves rendered victims by a society that permits these abuses without any experience of remorse.

This context in which we reach out to provide help to the women victims of these practices. Our contribution essentially consists of making them aware of their rights in marriage and when the marriage is dissolved for whatever reason. We advise them and support them in court so that their cries of distress can be heard and heeded.

On a practical level, within the framework of justice and peace, we organize educational sessions to share with women of all backgrounds what their basic rights are and how to claim them. We create similar communication sessions on legal issues with other congregations who work with women. We encourage women to break the code of silence among themselves that covers up the perpetrators of these acts.

Before judicial authorities, I am committed to making it understood that since marriage is a contract, no woman should be forced into marriage without her consent. We also fight that their rights to dispose of material goods be recognized, respected, and protected by all following the death of the spouse.

In this ministry, in some cases, we do succeed in restoring widows' rights. In other instances, however, the cases still suffer from the effects of a double standard of justice (e.g., one measure for men, another for women) and the preponderant weight of long-established customs. We have known cases where even when the widow was not kicked out of the marital home [frequently located in the village of her deceased husband's family], the children were abandoned to the widow, who then had to fight for the survival and education of her children. The obvious consequences are poverty, early taking up of work by the children who must support the mother's efforts, and illiteracy for certain children because, due to lack of substantial financial means, schooling can no longer be guaranteed for all children. This often leads the girl-children into early pregnancies and marriages. In certain other cases that we have known, for fear of customary reprisals on their offspring, the widows have resigned themselves to remaining in this family prison. Being controlled by the dead spouse's family. [It is a lose-lose situation.]

To this day, although there are international and national legal instruments that prohibit these practices, they continue to exist. The challenges are still major in the

context of a predominantly male and overly permissive country. However, our commitment and resolve to fight and defend the victims remain firm.

For further reflection:

- *In what ways do you reach out to express solidarity with other women?*
 - *How do you give concrete support to women in their struggles?*
 - *Do you encourage men to see women's rights as basic human rights?*
 - *Is respect for and appreciation for women changing in your society?*
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UPCOMING FORUMS AND SESSIONS

23rd U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII)

April 15-26, 2024, at the U.N. in New York. <https://rb.gy/fw0hf1>

ECOSOC Youth Forum

April 16-18

Civil Society Conference

Date: May 9-10, 2024, at the U.N. in Nairobi, Kenya. <https://rb.gy/slpk00>

High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

Date: July 8-17, 2024, at the U.N. in New York. [HLPF](#)

Summit of the Future: Date 22-23 September 2024, in New York

Can also be watched on [UN WEB TV](#)