

Forum looks at Catholic role in economic empowerment

UNITED NATIONS – A March 7 forum co-sponsored by the Vatican's Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations looked at the issues involved in the economic empowerment of women and the role Catholic organizations play in helping women have a better financial footing.

The other sponsors of the forum were the Path to Peace Foundation and the Vincentian Center for Church and Society at St. John's University in Jamaica, N.Y.

The forum was a side event coinciding with the 52nd session of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women held Feb. 25-March 7 on the theme "The Human Dignity of Women in Contemporary Society: Economic Justice and Empowerment of Women."

The event focused principally on programs the Catholic community operates around the world. Organizers anticipated an audience of 80, but 200 people attended, with a number of them sitting on the floor of the meeting room so they could take part.

The number of participants surprised the speakers and organizers of the forum. The overflow crowd prompted Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Vatican's nuncio to the United Nations, to remark that the topic of the Catholic Church's response to the problems of women was apparently relevant enough to attract such a large crowd.

"Three hundred side events run concurrently," the archbishop said, "so I am surprised that despite the 'side event' fatigue that inevitably comes from an overabundance of these conferences, that so many people have chosen to join us."

"This conference seeks to identify the key contemporary social, economic and development issues involved in the economic empowerment of women," he said.

"By focusing upon the inalienable dignity of each human person, we can concentrate upon the current best practices and policies in financing in order to economically empower women and address individual empowerment and the needs of families," he said.

The panel was moderated by Mary Ann Dantuono, associate director of the Vincentian Center.

The four panelists were Christine Firer Hinze, professor of theology at Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York; Ann Orr, senior officer in the U.N. Financing for Development Office's Multistakeholder Engagement and Outreach Branch; Dorrette Byrd, director of program quality at Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas development and relief agency; and Sister Maureen McGovern, a Sister of the Good Shepherd and director of an organization called HandCrafting Justice.

The Catholic tradition has the goal of "authentic or integral development" of women "and connects it with the inherent dignity and God-given rights of every human person," said Dantuono.

"The goal of this important series and today's discussion," she continued, "is to examine the status of women in contemporary society through the lens of Catholic social teaching and to highlight the best policies and practices to achieve full human dignity."

While most of the panelists' presentations focused on the needs of impoverished, illiterate women of the world and the practical steps used to help them, Orr instead focused upon the need for focused policymaking at the United Nations directed toward helping impoverished and illiterate women.

Byrd spoke extensively on the effectiveness of microloans and her personal experiences in a variety of countries.

"Microloans put money into the hands of the people who most need it, that is, women," she said.

"Though we primarily concentrate upon the needs of women, we, of course, assist men" especially in agricultural enterprises, she added. "All human beings must be empowered and given dignity."

Sister McGovern spoke about the successes of HandCrafting Justice, a project of her order that "works in cooperation with impoverished, but entrepreneurially-minded women, in order to better their lives and those of their families."

The sisters market items the women make and raise awareness about the situations in which they live.

During her presentation, Sister McGovern demonstrated some of the handicrafts sold, including blankets, clothing, accessories, pottery and trinkets.

“Each purchase directly helps the lives of poor women who are sometimes the sole support of their families,” she said.

“Through direct interaction with customers, we are able to tell the stories of the artisans, which gives the purchaser a better understanding of who they’re supporting,” she said. “This raises awareness of the poverty and violence women of the Third World face every day.”

Sister McGovern explained that “the artisans are paid by the project on-site when an order is filled and ready to be shipped.”

“This allows the artisans sufficient financial resources,” she continued, “to support their families and themselves while continuing their craftwork. We wish to honor the dignity of work. That’s why we have chosen to honor the work of women’s hands and help bring about positive changes in their lives.”

She said that “financial independence fosters gender equality and the empowerment of women.”

Hinze, an expert on social ethics, spoke largely on Catholic social thought and economic justice, particularly as it relates to women.

She pointed out important similarities between Catholic social teaching and human rights philosophy.

“We fight for peace and justice because we are Christians. It is the reason we help those in need,” she explained.