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Vatican critics balk at United Nations health role co-sponsored by Malta

Malta co-sponsors draft resolution to see Vatican City take on a more active role in United Nations health talks



26 May 2021, 7:39am
by **Nicole Meilak**



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Malta has co-sponsored a draft resolution that will see the Vatican City take on a more active role in United Nations health talks, much to the alarm of reproductive and sexual rights advocates across the world.

The resolution, pushed by Italy, aims to formalise the status of the Holy See at the World Health Assembly (WHA), which is the governing body of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

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Foreign minister Evarist Bartolo confirmed that Malta had co-sponsored the Italian resolution, together with a majority of EU member states. "The Holy See shall not have the right to vote or to put forward candidates and will not have additional rights conferred to it other than those it already enjoys at the General Assembly."

The UN Resolution 58/314 allows the Holy See, in its capacity as an Observer State, to participate in the work of the UN General Assembly, including the right to participate in the general debate of the UNGA and to co-sponsor draft resolutions that make reference to the Holy See.

However, it does not have the right to vote or to put forward candidates in the UNGA.

Italy's draft resolution attempts to transfer these same rights to the WHA, raising concerns among reproductive and sexual rights advocates.

Jessica Stern, executive director of the LGBTIQ rights group OutRight Action International, was quoted by the openDemocracy media platform explaining the sharp contrast between the WHO's mission to support the health of all, and the Vatican's exclusionary position towards sexual minorities. "The WHO is no place for religiously based exclusion, especially in the midst of a pandemic which has disproportionately harmed those who are most vulnerable, including LGBTIQ people and women," she said.

Catholics for Choice president Jamie Manson added that the Vatican had repeatedly tried to thwart progress on women's and LGBT rights at the UN. "[Church doctrine] has life or death consequences, particularly in the poorest parts of the global south. It's very serious," Manson said.

While the resolution as it stands does not grant voting rights to the Holy See, the secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights, Neil Datta, argued that the Vatican will use this UN body to obstruct further progress on sexual and reproductive rights. "With such an institutionalised status at the WHA, as opposed to courtesy invitations, the Holy See could start acting here as it does elsewhere in the UN and that could cause trouble for sexual and reproductive rights," Datta warned.

The Vatican received heavy criticism from the UN human rights committee in a 2014 report that called out its attitudes toward homosexuality, contraception and abortion. Under Canon 1398, the Catholic Church opposes all forms of abortion procedures, with any person procuring a complete abortion subject to excommunication from the Church, barring them from receiving the Eucharist while stilling binding them to attend Mass.

However, acts that indirectly result in abortion, such as the removal of a cancerous womb or in cases of ovarian cancer, are recognised as morally legitimate acts so long as the procedure is aimed solely at preserving the woman's life.

Here, Malta adopts a stricter law, criminalising abortions even if it is done to preserve the life of the mother.



Nicole Meilak joined MaltaToday in 2020 as a journalist

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