

Federation for Women



& Family Planning



Statement by Wanda Nowicka on behalf of the Federation for Women and Family Planning and Action Canada for Population and Development on the report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, 27 March 2007.

This statement is delivered on behalf of the Sexual Rights Initiative and partners including 7 organizations engaged in human rights activism coming from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, North America and Europe¹.

We would like to commend the Special Rapporteur on her excellent report particularly her consideration of discrimination and practices harmful to the health of women and girls that are applied within communities out of reasons of religious belief. We also welcome the recommendations she makes to address cultural practices based on religion that are harmful to women and girls, which clearly include those that seek to control their sexuality.

In many countries, very often religious arguments are used to limit access to reproductive health care services such as abortion and contraception. Based on “conscientious objection”, doctors are able to deny reproductive health services on religious grounds; this greatly limits access to these services that only women need. Doctors who are gatekeepers of the health care system use this power to refuse women services to which they are entitled, while at the same time very often ignoring their obligation to refer women to medical practitioners that will provide this service.

What steps would you recommend that governments take to eliminate this “conscientious objection” barrier to women’s access to reproductive health services? What should governments do to ensure that doctors who object to providing reproductive health services on religious grounds actually fulfill their obligation to refer patients to professionals who do provide these services?

¹ The Sexual Rights Initiative: Action Canada for Population and Development (ACPD; Canada), Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA; India), International Centre for Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights (INCREASE; Nigeria), Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice (Netherlands). Partners: Positive Women’s Network (South Africa), Mulabi – Espacio Latinoamericano de Sexualidades y Derechos (Argentina), Federation for Women and Family Planning (Poland).