

**Statement to the Commission on Population and Development  
Acting as Preparatory Committee for the Special Session  
of the General Assembly**

**As written**

STATEMENT BY FRANCES KISSLING

PRESIDENT

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TO THE THIRTY-SECOND SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT, ACTING AS THE PREPARATORY COMMITTEE FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM OF ACTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

NEW YORK, 24 MARCH 1999

I am the president of Catholics for a Free Choice, an international movement of Catholics. Catholics for a Free Choice seeks to shape and advance sexual and reproductive health policies that promote women's well-being and respect the capacity and right of both men and women to make moral decisions regarding sexuality and reproduction. With supporters in over one hundred countries and sister organizations throughout Latin America, we can say with confidence that the Programme of Action of the ICPD enjoys strong support among the world's almost one billion Catholics.

As Catholics, we share our church's commitment to poverty alleviation and respect the dignity and rights of those marginalized, especially refugees, immigrants, and the poor, most of whom are women.

We strongly believe that meeting the *needs* of women for housing, jobs, education, and primary health care and sanitary living conditions, requires scrupulous attention and respect for women's human rights. Human rights and human needs are two sides to the same coin. They cannot be separated. This commission must resist efforts to polarize these critical components of women's well-being. We cannot go back on rights and we must move forward to satisfy needs.

We believe the Programme of Action has carefully and fairly balanced rights and needs in a way that respects the values of the world's Catholics- North and South. We are not divided, male and female. We are not divided.

The world's Catholics and Catholics for a Free Choice not only support economic, social and human development, debt cancellation and job creation. They also support women's human rights,

including reproductive rights, including the moral right to follow one's conscience on the very difficult questions of abortion.

Women's rights are human rights- simple rights, nothing new- simply freedom *from* coercion and discrimination, freedom to control one's destiny.

Survey after survey- from Argentina to Venezuela- show that inspite of the position of the Roman Catholic church and the pronouncements of the Holy See, Catholics support reproductive health in large majorities. Catholics support and use modern contraception- and use church approved periodic abstinence in single digit percentages.

Catholic women, especially in Latin America, suffer and die from unsafe and illegal abortions, whether in Chile or Brazil.

Catholic adolescents struggle with developing a sexual ethic and life, appropriate to their reality whether they live in Mexico or Minnesota.

Catholic women are sexually assaulted and seek to prevent pregnancy by using emergency contraception. They know that birth control pills taken so soon after sexual intercourse are not abortifacients.

For all those women, Catholics for a Free Choice stands in support of the Programme of Action— which was a major advance in ethical thought and action. We pray this conference will not turn from the Programme of Action commitment to both human needs and human rights.