Vatican
Vatican News



The Vatican's March 19 event at the United Nations about faith-based organizations promoting women's leadership, held during the 68th session of the U.N.'s Commission on the Status of Women (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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United Nations — March 22, 2024

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The Vatican's mission to the United Nations pressed for an international prohibition against the practice of child surrogacy on March 20, during a panel discussion that framed arrangements where women carry others' children as exploitative and contrary to the U.N.'s landmark 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, the Holy See's permanent observer to the U.N., cited stories of women in need choosing to become surrogate mothers in order to receive payment.

"A just society should not tolerate practices based ... on the exploitation of the situation of the mother's material needs," he told the event, which the Vatican mission co-hosted with the conservative advocacy group ADF International.

"The practice ... has far more in common with trafficking, of both women and children, than its proponents are willing to admit," said Caccia.

Pope Francis first called for an international ban against surrogacy in January, as part of his annual "State of the World" address to global ambassadors representing their countries at the Vatican.

The Vatican's U.N. mission hosted the March 20 event as part of the 68th session of the U.N.'s Commission on the Status of Women, which promotes gender equality and women's empowerment. Other speakers on the panel included Giorgio Mazzoli, ADF International's director of U.N. advocacy, and Olivia Maurel, a woman who was born via surrogacy and now condemns the practice.

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"There is no ethical way of selling children, like there is no ethical way to rent a woman's body," said Maurel. "Women and children pay way too much of a price."

Surrogacy arrangements typically involve a woman agreeing to carry an embryo created for a couple via in vitro fertilization, and often include payment to the woman. Although there are no exact figures of children born through surrogacy, it is estimated by some analysts to be a $14 billion industry in the U.S.

The Vatican's panel on the surrogacy issue was part of a trio of side events hosted by the mission in conjunction with the U.N. commission's session. The other events

focused on the needs of children and adults with Down syndrome, and on how faith-based organizations can promote women's leadership.

The latter panel event, co-hosted with Caritas Internationalis on March 19, featured several women who lead Catholic charity organizations in places across the world.

Kerry Robinson, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, told Caccia and the other attendees that a young woman deciding what profession to choose "knows that she can reach high levels of leadership in any sector or industry."

"But when that same woman discerns a vocation of service to the church she loves, she is often met with limitations on her leadership," she said. "She finds she cannot bring her full complement of competencies to bear on serving the church, so she turns her attention instead to the secular world, where she can excel, be promoted, be appreciated, lead and serve fully."



A screen displays the theme during the panel hosted by the Vatican's mission to the U.N. on March 19 about faith-based organizations promoting women's leadership. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

Robinson, who is also a former executive partner at Leadership Roundtable, an organization promoting best practices in the church, said that "ensuring that women occupy important leadership roles in the church is critical."

"It is what the church needs to thrive," she said. "If we care deeply about the Catholic Church and fail to recognize and utilize the full gifts and talents of women in service to our faith community, we are squandering an enormous asset."

Another panelist, Helen Kezie-Nwoha, expressed agreement with Robinson. During her presentation, Kezie-Nwoha, the executive director of the Women's International Peace Centre, based in Uganda, turned toward Caccia and said she wanted the church "to do more in terms of getting women into leadership positions."

"We are not seeing enough," she said. "We need to see something. We need to see role models. Our daughters ask us questions."

For his part, Caccia pointed to Francis' efforts to appoint more women to positions of leadership in the church, including the pope's 2020 appointment of the first woman to serve as an undersecretary in the Vatican's Secretariat of State.

"There is always more to be done, and situations to be improved," said the archbishop.

"Under Pope Francis, more women have been placed in roles previously held only by men, in positions of responsibility and influence," he said. "Catholic women, both lay and religious, have long been in the vanguard of these efforts, bringing what recent popes have referred to as their 'feminine genius' — the profound and unique gift which only they can offer."

A version of this story appeared in the **April 12-25, 2024** print issue under the headline: At UN event, Vatican presses for global ban on child surrogacy.