

UN adopts plan to combat violence against women

March 16 2013, by Edith M. Lederer

(AP)—Conservative Muslim and Roman Catholic countries and liberal Western nations approved a U.N. blueprint to combat violence against women and girls, ignoring strong objections from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood that it clashed with Islamic principles and sought to destroy the family.

After two weeks of tough and often contentious negotiations, 131 countries joined consensus Friday night on a compromise 17-page document that Michelle Bachelet, the head of the U.N. [women's](#) agency, called historic because it sets global standards for action to prevent and end "one of the gravest violations of human rights in the world, the violence that is committed against women and girls."

"People worldwide expected action, and we didn't fail them," she said to loud applause. "Yes, we did it!"

On Wednesday, the Brotherhood, which has emerged as the most powerful political faction in Egypt since the 2011 uprising, lashed out at the anticipated document for advocating sexual freedoms for women and the right to abortion "under the guise of sexual and reproductive rights." It called the title, on eliminating and preventing all forms of violence against women and girls, "deceitful."

Last week, Egypt proposed an amendment to the text saying that each country is sovereign and can implement the document in accordance with its own laws and customs, a provision strongly opposed by many

countries in Europe, [Latin America](#) and Asia.

It was dropped in the final compromise drafted by the meeting's chair. Instead, the final text urges all countries "to strongly condemn all forms of violence against women and girls and to refrain from invoking any custom, tradition and religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination."

When countries were polled on their views on the final draft, there was fear among the declaration's supporters that Egypt would oppose it, which would block the consensus required for adoption.

The head of Egypt's delegation, politician and diplomat Mervat Tallawy, surprised and delighted the overwhelming majority of delegates and onlookers in the crowded U.N. conference room when she ignored the Brotherhood and announced that Egypt would join consensus.

"International solidarity is needed for women's empowerment and preventing this regressive mood, whether in the developing countries or developed, or in the Middle East in particular," Tallawy told two reporters afterwards. "It's a global wave of conservatism, of repression against women, and this paper is a message that if we can get together, hold power together, we can be a strong wave against this conservatism."

Tallawy, who is president of the National Council for Women-Egypt, said she has told this to Egypt's President Mohammed Morsi, who came from the Muslim Brotherhood,

"I believe in women's cause. I don't take money from the government. I work voluntarily. If they want to kick me out they can. But I will not change my belief in women," she said. "Women are the slaves of this age. This is unacceptable, and particularly in our region."

A number of Muslim and Catholic countries including Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the Holy See and Honduras expressed reservations about elements of the text—but Libya was the only country to dissociate itself from the final document though it did not block consensus.

Libya's top cleric raised similar concerns to the Muslim Brotherhood, rejecting the document for violating Islamic teachings. The Libyan delegation objected to paragraphs calling for sex education for all adolescents and youth, with appropriate direction from parents, and for priority to programs for girls' education so they can take responsibility for their own lives, "including access to a sustainable livelihood."

At the start of the meeting, Bachelet said data from the World Health Organization and other research shows that an average of 40 percent—and up to 70 per cent of women in some countries—face violence in their lifetimes, and she pointed to recent high-profile attacks on women in India and Pakistan. She said Friday that during the two-week session "countless women and girls around the world have suffered violence."

When the Commission on the Status of Women took up violence against women a decade ago, governments were unable to reach agreement on a final document because of differences over sex education, a woman's right to reproductive health, and demands for an exception for traditional, cultural and religious practices.

The final document approved Friday reaffirms that women and men have the right to enjoy all human rights "on an equal basis," recommits governments to comprehensive sex education, calls for sexual and reproductive health services such as emergency contraception and safe abortion for victims of violence, and calls on government to criminalize [violence against women](#) and punish gender-related killings. But it dropped references to sexual orientation and gender identity.

"We did make gains," said Francoise Girard, president of the New York-based International Women's Health Coalition. "This is the first time we have an agreed document recognizing emergency contraception as a necessary service to preserve women's health."

Terri Robl, the U.S. deputy representative to the U.N. Economic and Social Council, called the agreement an important step but said the text is "only a beginning." She expressed regret at its failure to state that ending violence must apply to all women, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, or to refer specifically to "intimate partner violence."

While the document is not legally binding, Britain's U.N. Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant said "it sets a certain standard by which all member states can monitor their performance and can be monitored by others."

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