

56<sup>th</sup>  
Session



**COMMISSION ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT**  
Population, education and sustainable development

10 - 14 April 2023 | New York | [www.unpopulation.org](http://www.unpopulation.org)



## **Between Taboos and Freedom: Religion, Rights and Reproductive Justice**

UN Commission on Population and Development 56

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| <b>Date</b>                          | 11 <sup>th</sup> April 2023, 13:15 – 14:30   |
| <b>Venue</b>                         | Conference Room 5, UN HQ, Official Side Event, Capacity of 109   |
| <b>Co-Sponsors and Co-Organisers</b> | Norway MFA, Argentina, UNFPA, ACT Alliance, NCA, World YWCA, Faith to Action Network, Fòs Feminista, Act Church of Sweden  |
| <b>Contact Points</b>                | Dr. Rachel Tavernor, ACT Alliance, <a href="mailto:rachel.tavernor@actalliance.org">rachel.tavernor@actalliance.org</a><br>Haldis Karstad, NCA, <a href="mailto:haldis.karstad@nca.no">haldis.karstad@nca.no</a> |

Women and girls' rights in all their diversity are being threatened, deprioritised and structural inequalities further intensified. Girls are being robbed of their adolescence and freedoms and forced into child marriages and motherhood. Everyone should have the ability to decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence.

There have been increased gaps between sexual and reproductive health and rights policy frameworks and the constrained socio-economic contexts where these frameworks are implemented. While the right to information is embodied in several international treaties and conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, many are denied access to information, and education, including Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE).

Comprehensive Sexuality Education is a fundamental step towards achieving sexual and reproductive justice. Comprehensive Sexuality Education contributes to dismantling the stigma and addressing taboos that serves as a significant contributor to harmful practices, including all forms of violence and discrimination based on age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and gender identity.

To ensure access to CSE becomes a reality for all, innovative methodologies and collaborations are paramount. This requires an intersectional-paradigm shift, at community, country, regional and global levels. To secure human rights and reproductive justice, transformative and innovative collaborations is needed. The most marginalised must not be left behind.

Faith actors are critical stakeholders, who have a normative and real-life influence on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. Faith actors can both positively and negatively influence the uptake, acceptability, and accessibility of preventive measures, education, and services. Education and health care systems around the world are sustained and delivered by faith communities in many parts of the world. In many communities, engaging faith actors is paramount for access and acceptability.

In this Side Event, gender and SRHR advocates from Africa, Asia, and Latin America will share their experiences and potential on how to engage faith actors in advocating for the SRHR and reproductive justice. The panel will provide recommendations to Member States on how to engage faith actors to contribute to the promotion of SRHR to enable transformative change.

**Expected Outcomes:**

1. Increased understanding of the obstacles and the possibilities to ensure CSE from the local to the global level;
2. Enhanced knowledge of the important role faith actors can have in promoting SRHR and CSE;
3. Highlighted good practices and possible entry points, methods, and approaches of engagement with faith actors and faith-based methods to strengthen young people’s access to SRHR and CSE;
4. Increased understanding of how CSE influences the fulfilment of youth’s rights including SRHR.

To register for the event and to see a list of our speakers, please visit our [Eventbrite page here](#).

**Speakers:**

- State Secretary Bjørg Sandkjær, Norway
- H.E. Ms. María del Carmen Squeff, Argentina
- Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA
- Rudelmar Bueno de Faria, ACT Alliance
- Nirmala Gurung, World YWCA
- Yilikal Shiferaw, Ethiopian Orthodox Church
- Paula Sánchez-Mejorada Ibarra, CDD México / Fòs Feminista

**Moderator:** Zanele Makombe, ACT Ubumbano

**Run of Show**

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| 13:00 | Speakers Arrive for a short brief and overview of the session. | Conference Room 5                      |
| 13:15 | Event starts, and welcome by Moderator                         | Zanele Makombe                         |
| 13:20 | Opening remarks, Norway  | State Secretary Bjørg Sandkjær, Norway |
| 13:25 | Introductory remarks, UNFPA                                    | Dr. Natalia Kanem                      |
| 13:35 | In Dialogue with panel (2 questions each):                     |  |

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|       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rudelmar Bueno de Faria, ACT Alliance</li> <li>• Nirmala Gurung, World YWCA</li> <li>• Yilikal Shiferaw, Ethiopian Orthodox Church</li> <li>• Paula Sánchez-Mejorada Ibarra, CDD México</li> </ul> |   |
| 14:15 | Contribution from floor (if time, a request from UK International Development Minister)   |   |
| 14:20 | Closing remarks, Argentina  | H.E. Ms. María del Carmen Squeff, Argentina |
| 14:25 | Thank you and closing, by Moderator   | Zanele Makombe                              |
| 14:30 | End   |   |

### Speaker Bios

**Zanele Maphosa-Makombe (ACT Ubumbano):** Ms Makombe is a social justice activist who believes in the power of words and voice that calls out injustices against women and children. Her 18 years of experience in supporting adolescent and youth programmes, sexual & reproductive health rights, and gender justice is of great value in her role as Programme & SRHR Advisor in the ACT Ubumbano team. Zanele has a Master’s Degree in Development Studies.

**Dr. Natalia Kanem (UNFPA):** Dr Kanem is the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). UNFPA is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health and rights agency. Appointed by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres in 2017, Dr. Kanem has more than 30 years of strategic leadership experience in the fields of preventive medicine, public and reproductive health, social justice and philanthropy. She started her research career in academia with the Johns Hopkins and Columbia University schools of medicine and public health.

**Bjørge Sandkjær (Norway):** Sandkjær is the State Secretary (International Development), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway. Sandkjær has a broad background in international development, particularly in the fields of global health, human rights and aid effectiveness. Prior to her current position, Sandkjær served as the deputy leader of the Standing Committee on Health and Welfare of the Oslo City Council. Sandkjær has 20 years of experience working in the areas of global health and human rights, and has held positions at the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and the Church of Norway.

**H.E. Ms. María del Carmen Squeff (Argentina):** Ambassador Squeff is the Permanent Representative of Argentina to the United Nations. Before her latest appointment, Ms. Squeff was her country’s Undersecretary for the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and international economic negotiations. She served as ambassador to Nigeria (2018-2019) and France (2013-2016) and was seconded to the Organization of American States (OAS) Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia from 2016 to 2017. She also served as Undersecretary of Foreign Policy from 2011 to 2013.

**Nirmala Gurung (World YWCA):** Gurung is a Research and Engagement Associate for Rise Up! Leadership Initiative in Asia-Pacific. Nirmala is a passionate, detail-oriented, grassroots-driven advocate. She specialises in co-designing, implementation, evaluation and youth-led evidence generation. She is a firm believer in the YWCA model of young women’s leadership and has extensively spoken about breaking formal and informal power structures. For many years, she has delivered training for young women through communities and national levels on issues that matter to them—sexual and reproductive health and rights, mental health, gender justice, and more. As a human-rights advocate, Nirmala has been working with youth across Asia for a long time.

**Rudelmar Bueno de Faria (ACT Alliance):** Faria is the General Secretary (CEO) of the ACT Alliance, an international coalition of 152 churches and faith-based organizations working together in humanitarian assistance, sustainable development and advocacy work in over 120 countries. Prior to this, he served as the World Council of Churches Representative to the United Nations and Deputy Director of the Lutheran World Service. Mr. de Faria has over 25 years of experience working with national and international non-governmental organizations. His education and training embraces business administration, international relations, community development and international humanitarian law. Under his leadership, the ACT Alliance developed a new strategic direction focusing on gender, including strategic partnerships with UNFPA and UN-Women, and ACT Alliance commitments to the Nairobi Statement on ICPD25.

**Yilikal Shiferaw:** Shiferaw has over 25 years of multi-sectoral experience in the civic sector in Ethiopia and Kenya. He is a capacity development specialist, with a BA, and three MAs, and accumulated vast experience in developing capacities of CSOs, government, and communities. He has designed and managed programs in leadership, governance, conflict resolution & peacebuilding, Humanitarian intervention, women's empowerment, livelihood, and education. He is active in the civic sector and has helped to found several CSOs and serves on various CSO boards both locally and globally on a voluntary basis. Currently he is serving as Commissioner for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Development and Inter Church Aid Commission (EOTC DICAC).

**Paula Sánchez-Mejorada Ibarra:** Sánchez-Mejorada is a feminist activist, Co-director of Catholics for the Right to Decide Mexico (CDD), a CSO that has worked for 28 years to promote gender and reproductive justice from a feminist theological perspective. CDD México is a member of Fos Feminista, an alliance that brings together more than 170 organizations worldwide focused on sexual and reproductive health care and activism. Sánchez-Mejorada has worked for 17 years in government and civil society organizations (including Fondo Semillas and Oxfam Mexico) on issues related to human rights, specifically women's human rights. In these spheres, she has been responsible for supervising programs and projects at the national and local level and has focused on resource mobilization and institutional development. She has a Master's in Public Administration and non-profit management from Syracuse University in New York, for which she secured the Fullbright García Robles scholarship. She also holds a Master in International Relations with an emphasis in development from the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals, as well as studies in gender, children's rights and feminist and decolonial theologies.