

# CSW Parallel Event Concept Note for IBVM/CJ, VIVAT International, Medical Mission Sisters, Maryknoll Sisters, and Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd:

**Title:** *Beijing Platform for Action: Women and Church Action for Gender Equity*

**Subtheme:** *Dangerous Women: Catholic Religious Women and Gender Equality*

**Date & Time:** March 11, 12:30 - 2:00 PM

**Venue:** Church Centre at the UN, 777 United Nations Plz., New York, NY 10017

## **Purpose of the Webinar**

This intergenerational dialogue will explore the experiences of women of faith since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. It will highlight the rich history and contributions of religious women, emphasizing the innovative ways they have navigated and worked within patriarchal systems to effect meaningful change.

We will examine the progress made, identify persistent gaps, and discuss how women religious, faith-based organizations, and men of faith can collaborate to advance gender equality. A central theme will be the wisdom of our women founders—what have we learned from them that remains relevant today? The session will also share best practices and challenges encountered by faith-based organizations serving grassroots communities.

## **Background**

For over 500 years, religious women have played a transformative role in society, often challenging patriarchal structures within the Church. In 1617, Mary Ward, founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Congregation of Jesus, boldly declared, *“Women are in no way inferior to that other half of the human race, namely men.”* For her audacity, she was condemned and imprisoned. Yet, her vision paved the way for generations of women religious to engage in social justice work.

Despite resistance from Church leadership, women religious have continued to pioneer services for the most marginalized—establishing hospitals, schools, and shelters. Trailblazers such as Louise de Marillac (1633), Elizabeth Ann Seton (1809), Mary Aikenhead (1815), Catherine McAuley (1824), and Mary MacKillop (1866) demonstrated remarkable resilience. They organized and administered institutions that provided education, healthcare, and support to oppressed communities, often in defiance of institutional restrictions.

One notable figure, St. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier (1835), founder of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, was a powerful advocate for the empowerment and dignity of women and girls. Committed to addressing systemic oppression, she established her order not only to provide spiritual care but also to champion the rights of vulnerable women.

Similarly, Anna Dengel, founder of the Medical Mission Sisters, recognized the dire lack of medical care for women, particularly during childbirth. In the early 1900s, religious women with public vows were not permitted to practice medicine. To circumvent this, Dengel and her sisters initially functioned as a 'pious society' until the law changed in 1936, allowing them to take public vows and continue their medical mission.

Today, religious women remain at the forefront of justice work—whether in the bomb-shelter basements of Ukraine, at the U.S.-Mexico border, in the slums of Kolkata and Nairobi, or deep in the Amazon forests. They empower women through education, advocacy, and direct service, tackling issues such as human trafficking, poverty, and environmental justice. Initiatives such as *Nuns on the Bus* in the United States and advocacy for fisherfolk in the Philippines exemplify their ongoing commitment to social change. While Church leadership has often equated ministry with liturgy, women religious have remained steadfast in their belief that true ministry lies in healing, teaching, and serving—just as Jesus exemplified.

## Where We Are Now

Following in the footsteps of Venerable Mary Ward, Anna Dengel, Mother Mary Joseph, Blessed Maria Helena Stollenwerk, Blessed Josepha Hendrina Stenmans, and Saint Euphrasia Pelletier, we continue to affirm the leadership and capacity of women.

- We provide **holistic education** for girls, women, and children—both formal and informal—equipping them with skills to participate meaningfully in economic, social, and political spheres locally and globally.
- We offer **leadership training and advocacy** programs to empower women and girls as agents of change.
- We work across diverse **medical fields**, integrating allopathic and traditional healing practices in countries such as India, Pakistan, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Malawi, Ethiopia, Peru, Venezuela, Indonesia, and the Philippines, as well as in the USA and Europe (UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium).
- Our mission has evolved from curative medicine to **preventive, promotive, and holistic healing**, with a strong commitment to **environmental justice**, particularly in climate-affected regions where the poorest populations bear the greatest burden.

- The **Good Shepherd Sisters** continue their legacy by addressing the needs of vulnerable girls, women, and children, focusing on **community development, sustainable livelihoods, and women's rights.**

## **Speakers**

- Brenda Eagan ibvm – Director of Mission & Ministry, United States Region, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary
- Leonida Kwamboko Oriki ibvm - Director, Wanawake kwa Wanawake Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya
- Babita Kumari mms – Medical Mission Sisters
- Good Shepherd Sister (TBA)
- Holy Spirit Sister (TBA)

This session will celebrate the radical, creative and transformative contributions of women of faith in advancing gender equity within their communities and beyond. We invite all who share this commitment to join us in dialogue and action.