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Rights Activist Dis-invited as Keynote Speaker on Violence Against Women Due to Right Wing Pressure

Statement by Charlotte Bunch, Center for Women's Global
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A year ago, I was invited to be the Keynote speaker for a National Conference on Violence Against Women held in Cincinnati Ohio on April 24, 2010. The Conference was organized by the Office of Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation of the Sisters of Charity in coordination with representatives of 10 other organizations sponsoring the event, and I was pleased to speak with Catholic nuns that were actively addressing this issue. A few days before my flight, I received an email dis-inviting me due to pressure from the right wing and the Catholic Church hierarchy in Cincinnati

The letter inviting me stated that they had reviewed my work and believed that I "would bring the experience and expertise our gathering in Cincinnati, Ohio needs." As a person who has worked on the issue for over two decades and served as a member of the International Advisory Committee to the Secretary General of the United Nations for his in depth study on violence against women in 2006, I also thought I had much to offer the event.

The email dis-inviting me said that the organizers had received phone calls and letters from "right to life" persons protesting me as the keynote speaker, that the president of Seton High School (a Catholic Girls School sponsored by the Sisters of Charity that was the venue for the event) said they could not hold the event there if I spoke, and that the Archbishop of Cincinnati withdrew sponsorship of the three co-sponsoring diocesan offices. I understand that the reason is because I am pro choice, and "advocate for positions contrary to Catholic Church teaching." While the organizers said they strongly resisted this pressure, it was to no avail.

It is ironic that a conference about violence against women is marred by violence against the women organizing it and against a female speaker. Let me be clear that threatening to close down this event if I spoke is an act of violence against women itself - an act of suppression and disrespect to the planning the

organizers invested in preparation, as well as a denial of my fundamental freedom of speech.

This incident is indicative of our times and the intolerant atmosphere created by right wing forces in the USA, as well as of the pressures put on women in the Catholic Church by male hierarchical leaders. It is tragic that at a time when the Catholic Church is facing very serious and credible charges of covering up sexual abuse of children on a large scale in many countries, it still acts with impunity to violate women's right to speak about violence against women. Is this the listening to victims that the world so rightly demands from the church?

Charlotte Bunch is the Founding Director and Senior Scholar of the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University, where she is also a Distinguished Board of Governor's Professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies. For more information or discussion, contact Charlotte Bunch at cbunch@igc.org.