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Oral Statement at the 51st Session of the Commission on Population and Development

The effects of urbanization and migration are frequently addressed in UN resolutions and debates on a whole host of topics ranging from the economy to the environment and global health.

Families are greatly affected by urbanization and migration. Living and working conditions in cities as well as the risks and precariousness involved in migration too often contribute to families being torn apart and they make it harder for young people to form their own families.

Human mobility through migration and urbanization also lead to increased vulnerability to poverty and human trafficking, because when a family breaks up it also deprives persons of their first line of defense against exploitation and abuse.

But the family does not receive the attention it deserves by the international community. It seems the only context in which we can talk about the family and human rights is in the context of family planning.

Sadly, the family has at times even become a contentious subject, leading to acrimony and discord in international negotiations. This is a problem because it is preventing us from helping families all around the world who are badly in need of laws, policies, and programming that will help to protect and strengthen their role as first line of defense against exploitation and abuse.

And in all of this we are often forgetful of already existing benchmarks of protection for the family internationally. By failing to adequately address protection of the family we are failing to uphold these already established obligations to protect the family under binding international instruments, and other political commitments.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society and affirms that the family is entitled to protection by society and the state. It further establishes that men and women have an equal right to freely marry and found a family and equal rights in the context of marriage and family life.

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Further core human rights obligations toward the family include ensuring the prior right of parents to determine the type of education their children receive, safeguarding the right of children to a cultural and religious identity, and most importantly in the context of human mobility, realizing the right of children to know and be cared for by their mother and father and be reunited with them speedily.

These related obligations underpin many existing commitments in UN agreements, including the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, and the Habitat agenda for human settlements, with regard to family reunification, family housing, family stability, health, and other forms of social support.

We hope that on this the 70th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the international community can stop being forgetful of our common heritage and make use of the tools we already possess to strengthen and protect the family. So that the many millions of families on the move across international borders and within countries can receive the protection they are entitled to.