

**Statement by H.E. Professor Mary Ann Glendon,  
President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences**

**Economic and Social Council  
Commission on the Status of Women:  
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women  
and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly**

Madam Chair,

1. In 2005, the United Nations will mark the anniversaries of five historic moments when the family of nations gave encouragement and impetus to women on their quest for recognition of their equal rights and dignity. The first and most consequential of these moments occurred exactly sixty years ago. It was in the spring of 1945 when the founders of the U.N. astonished many by proclaiming their "faith...in the dignity and worth of the human person" and "in the equal rights of men and women." At the time, there was not a single country in the world where women enjoyed full social and legal equality. By lifting up a different vision in the U.N. Charter, far-sighted men and women accelerated a process that would soon yield unprecedented opportunities for the world's women. As that process gathered momentum, the four U.N. women's conferences --in Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing--provided occasions at key stages to assess progress and chart new directions. Today, the equality principle is officially accepted nearly everywhere in the world, and has increasingly been brought to life in a variety of social contexts.

Yet even as we celebrate those great gains, women are facing new challenges. For the same years that saw great advances for many women, brought new forms of poverty to many others, and new threats to human life and dignity.

2. A stark reminder that women's journey still has far to go is the fact that three-quarters of the world's poverty population today is composed of women and children. In the developing world, hundreds of millions of women and children lack adequate nutrition, sanitation, and basic health care. And even in affluent societies, the faces of the poor are predominantly those of women and children, for, as noted in the Beijing Platform, there is a strong correlation between family breakdown and the feminization of poverty. The costs of rapid increases in divorce and single-parenthood have fallen heavily on women, and most heavily of all on those women who have made personal sacrifices to care for children and other family members.

3. Ten years ago, the Beijing Platform proclaimed that, "The key to moving women and their families out of poverty is education." The Holy See, with its longstanding dedication to educating women and girls, notes with concern, therefore, that improvements on this front have been slow, with girls still forming the majority of more than 100 million children of primary school age who are not enrolled in school. Until conditions are

established for every girl to develop her full human potential, not only will women's progress be impeded, but humanity will be deprived of one of its greatest untapped resources of intelligence and creativity.

4. As we look ahead, moreover, a new shadow has fallen over women's path, due to the changing age structure of the world's populations. The combination of greater longevity, falling birth-rates, rising costs of health care, and shortage of care-takers is already giving rise to tensions between younger and older generations. That shift in dependency ratios is raising serious questions about the future well-being of the frail elderly, and especially of women who, with their greater longevity, are disproportionately represented among the dependent elderly and more likely to be in poverty. In a world that has become dangerously careless about protecting human life at its frail beginnings and endings, older women are likely to be at particular risk.

5. In its Final Statement at the Beijing Conference, the Holy See expressed the fear that the sections of the Beijing documents dealing with women in poverty would remain empty promises unless backed up by well-thought-out programs and financial commitments. Today, with growing disparities of wealth and opportunity, we are obliged to raise that concern again. The recent findings of the U.N. Millennium Project, as well as first-hand observations from over 300,000 Catholic education, health service and relief agencies, serving mainly the most marginalized people, confirm that the fears we expressed in 1995 continue to be well founded.

6. What makes the plight of the world's most disadvantaged women a scandal as well as a tragedy, Madam Chair, is the fact that, for the first time in history, humanity finally has the means to defeat hunger and poverty. Feasible action programs, such as those set forth in the Millennium Development Goals, have outlined steps that, if taken, could lift more than 500 million people out of extreme poverty by the year 2015. But movement toward that goal has already fallen behind established targets. Clearly, goals and action plans are not enough. What is needed, as Pope John Paul II recently pointed out, is "a vast moral mobilization of public opinion....especially in those countries enjoying a sufficient or even prosperous standard of living."

In that connection, Madam Chair, the Holy See wishes to take this occasion to reaffirm its own longstanding commitments to the education and

health of women and girls, and to pledge its redoubled efforts to awaken the consciences of the privileged.

7. Finally, Madam Chair, as women's journey moves forward, we wish to note another problem to which no society has yet found a satisfactory solution. The application of the equality principle to the actual life circumstances of the majority of women--mothers and others who give priority to care-giving roles--continues to pose a challenge. The problem of harmonizing women's aspirations for fuller participation in social and economic life with their roles in family life is one that women themselves are fully capable of resolving. But the problem will not be resolved without certain major, one may even say radical, changes in society. In the first place, policy makers must attend more closely to women's own accounts of what is important to them, rather than to special interest groups that purport to speak for women but often do not have women's interests at heart. Secondly, care-giving, paid or unpaid, must receive the respect it deserves as one of the most important forms of human work. And thirdly, paid labor must be structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their security and advancement at the expense of the roles in which many millions of them find their deepest fulfillment. In sum, the problem will not be solved until human values take precedence over economic values.

No one can deny, Madam Chair, that those steps would require profound changes in attitudes and organizations. But it was nothing less than a profound cultural transformation that the founders of the U.N. envisioned sixty years ago when they boldly proclaimed women's equality and insisted with equal vigor on protection for the family, motherhood and childhood. It was nothing less than a profound cultural transformation that they envisioned when they committed themselves to advancing "better standards of life in larger freedom" for all women and men. Now that we have traveled so far toward making that vision a reality, should we not have the courage to carry on to the end?

Thank you, Madam Chair.