



HOLY SEE

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Statement by the Holy See Delegation

**Economic and Social Council
57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

**On Item 3 (a)(i):
Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls**

New York, 11 March 2013

Madame Chair,

This year's choice of this important topic underlines the tragic reality of the continued victimization of women and girls around the world by myriad forms of exploitation and violence, in a shameful continuum, ranging from sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, abandonment, trafficking, rape, domestic abuse, rape as a weapon of war, forced prostitution, to misguided government policies unduly restricting the number of children per family and other forms of violence. Many women and girls, from the moment of conception until natural death, face an array of immoral and dehumanizing acts of violence. In addition, degrading practices, such as female genital mutilation, child marriage, forced sterilization and forced abortions, characterize this continuum and constitute heinous forms of oppression trampling upon the dignity of women and girls. This reality demands that Governments as well as all societal institutions undertake concerted and comprehensive efforts to address this grave problem.

My Delegation reiterates its strong commitment to address the pressing need to acknowledge the authentic dignity and worth of all women and girls, especially of those poorest of the poor, the illiterate, the disenfranchised, the abandoned, the aged, the migrants and refugees, the outcasts and the pariahs. More fundamentally, it is our resolve that women and girls be respected and appreciated according to their equal dignity with any member of the human family. Blessed Pope John Paul II reminded us that "Christ's way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women."¹ It is widely recognized that the more the dignity of women is promoted and protected, the more so the family, the community and society as a whole will flourish. Likewise, every time a woman is subjected to violence, it is the whole community and society itself that suffer. The principle of respect for the life and dignity of every human being is inalienable. Therefore, every government, in collaboration with the rest of the societal institutions, should assume the responsibility to protect and care for women and to recognize their indispensable roles in the family and in the wider society.

Madame Chair,

At a time when government and its juridical institutions have firmly committed to the objective truth about women's full dignity, and to concrete policies that ensure every woman's right to enjoy full social and legal equality with men, any silence over violent acts perpetrated against women, any impunity of the abusers, and any impassivity or indifference towards physical or sexual crimes, remain intolerable. This violence is destructive of what is most intimate to the woman; of her will guided by her intellect; and of her desire to live, to give life and to love. Indeed, the body is not a consumer good, it is not merchandise, and it is not a

¹ *Mulieris dignitatem*, #15.

mere instrument for selfish interests. The commodification of any member of the human family is iniquitous and this truth must be understood by this Organization, the international order, and all people of good will.

Various acts of violence and exploitation committed against women constitute a phenomenon that cuts across the lines of income, class, culture, age, ethnic, economic and social backgrounds. My Delegation wishes to take this occasion to reaffirm as clearly and strongly as possible, that violence perpetrated against women, inside the home or outside the home, can never be justified for any reason or purpose.

Madame Chair,

It is now widely acknowledged that violence is often gravely compounded by societal context. In many parts of the world, women are the first victims of reductive ideologies that postulate and glorify a conception of the human body and of its sexual availability that is strongly threatening to the dignity of women². Pursuing this ideology only leads to a vision of the human person, wherein women are necessarily discriminated against and are easily considered as a possession, and the corollary, of being disposable at will. The advertising which proliferates around the world is an example of how the human person is demeaned, commodified and sexualized into an object for others' perversion and lust. The woman is thereby reduced to a body without a mind or a soul. In this context, it is most urgent for us to discern solutions that are not merely limited to the short term, or lowest common denominator, and which inevitably prolong the causes for violence, but rather to pursue solutions which address the root causes of violence versus women.

In such a context, we must work to promote a culture where the most defenceless are protected. Respect for human life, from conception to natural death, is the starting point for confronting a culture of violence. It is also, both philosophically and practically speaking, an inalienable principle. In this regard, any measure which would, of itself, inflict violence cannot at all be considered a fitting response to violence in some of the most difficult social problems confronting women. Hence, as many women who have undergone this experience know, abortion, in all its forms, can never be considered as a right solution to any of the plagues that target women; rather, compounding violence with violence increases societal trauma and cannot but contribute to aggravating the spread and the pain of violence in our societies.³ In the powerful words of Blessed John Paul II, the only proper response to a woman suffering a

² *Evangelium vitae*, # 13.

³ Pope Benedict XVI: "The Church forcefully maintains this link between life ethics and social ethics, fully aware that 'a society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized'" (*Caritas in veritate*, #15)

crisis pregnancy is “radical solidarity”⁴ with the woman in need, not encouraging her to perpetuate the cycle of violence. Therefore, we must not permit a culture which fosters a “*war of the powerful against the weak*”⁵ or even “a war of the weak against the weak”, or which postulate “rights” that are a defeat for human life and for women’s dignity, while ignoring the urgent rights of the most defenceless in society.

Madame Chair,

A renewed commitment must be made to put in place structures that better help and provide victims of violence with the necessary support and protection. Likewise, it is essential to protect children and to provide them with an education which better allows fundamental values to be transmitted, such as authentic respect of the other, personal responsibility, and awareness of the value and sacredness of the body, and of every human life itself. Efforts must be undertaken to educate men at every level of society, and in their every role – including as husbands, fathers, employers, teachers, and public officials – regarding women’s equality, women’s gifts, and the intrinsic evil of all forms of violence visited upon women. Through these efforts we not only protect women and children from violence, but also ensure that the cycle of violence is not passed from one generation to the next.

Madame Chair,

In closing, my Delegation reaffirms its longstanding commitments to contribute to the elimination of violence perpetrated against women and girls through education, the support of women who are victims to violence; and more widely, to promote a culture of respect for every human being without distinction. As Blessed John Paul II wrote in his Letter to Women, the cause of women’s freedom is both “great” and “unfinished.”⁶ The decisions we make in this body will hopefully advance that cause and at the same time help to protect women from violence as they will also fulfil the Charter of this institution to advance the dignity and worth of all persons.

Thank you, Madame Chair.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, (1995) p.207.

⁵ *Evangelium vitae*, # 12

⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, #6.