

## Commission on the Status of Women Fifty-ninth Session

Submission by Priests for Life

Priests for Life believes that while progress has been achieved in a number of areas 20 years after adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, much more needs to be accomplished so that the innate value of women will be recognized, respected and protected from discrimination and violence throughout the life cycle.

**The girl child** continues to face discrimination which is most severe in the use of sex determination techniques that identify her presence in the womb and lead to her death in sex-selective abortion. The Beijing Platform opposed the practice of prenatal sex selection in paragraph 38 stating *“Discrimination against women begins at the earliest stages of life and must therefore be addressed from then onwards.”*

Tragically, there has been little progress to stop this first act of discrimination against the girl child as the practice continues in countries and among cultures with a son preference. Anti-girl child discrimination also results in the killing of infant girls through infanticide or abandonment. The three most dangerous words in the world continue to be “It’s a girl.”

The Platform also recognized that son preference bias not only limits the access of girls to food, education and health care but to “even life itself”. While efforts to ensure girls’ access to food, education and health care have benefitted by nearly universal agreement since Beijing, endeavors to ensure that girls have universal access to “life itself” have been stymied by a global failure to embrace consistent non-discriminatory protection of girls beginning “at the earliest stages of life”.

Priests for Life seeks to ensure that respect for girls begins right from the start—while they are developing in the womb— as stated in the Platform. Our organization works to ensure that unborn baby girls are protected from abortion and guaranteed their right to life. It is our belief that the lives of all newly created individuals, regardless of sex, deserve respect, protection and non-discrimination.

Failure to protect girls in law from prenatal sex selection as recommended to governments in paragraph 283d—*“Enact and enforce legislation protecting girls from all forms of violence, including female infanticide and prenatal sex selection”*—begins the devaluation which perpetuates throughout the life cycle and renders the

worth of a girl contingent upon subjective views of wantedness and utility. The girl child becomes a commodity, devoid of innate dignity and value.

Currently, 200 million women and girls are missing from the world, victims of violence that devalues their lives and often results from cultural preferences for boys. Many of these "missing" girls were killed as a result of sex selection abortion and infanticide; others were the victims of violent acts that targeted girls and women or resulted from neglect and malnutrition.

We strongly concur with recognition of the multi-dimensional development needs of the girl child, *"For the girl child to develop her full potential she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded."* (paragraph 39)

The spiritual needs of the girl child include the essential development of a spiritual foundation that instills a deep sense of self-worth and dignity able to withstand temporal circumstances which can lead to poor self-esteem and feelings of inferiority. A strong spiritual foundation helps a young woman make the right choices during the adolescent years to preserve her sexual integrity and abstain from sexual activity allowing her to continue her education and preparations to achieve aspirations.

**Violence against women** tragically continues throughout the girl's life cycle, unabated as was described in paragraph 39: *"...discrimination and violence against girls begin at the earliest stages of life and continue unabated throughout their lives."*

There are clear linkages between violence against women and their unique procreative capacity. This is strikingly manifested in the origins of sex selection abortion as a population control tool which reduced the number of girls born in order to reduce the number of future mothers.

A long term impact of sex selection abortion— skewed birth ratios —leads to increased violence as women are kidnapped and sold as brides and young girls are forced into prostitution. This is most evident in China where the birth ratio has been as high as 124 boys for every 100 girls with a staggering number of "missing women" and projections that by 2020 there will be 30 million to 40 million more young men than young women.

Twenty years after the Beijing Platform, forced abortion and sterilization continue in China where they are used as tools to ensure compliance with the one-child birth limitation policy, yet, for the most part the world has not raised its voice in protest.

The linkage between violence against women and their procreative capacity is also revealed through coerced abortion. Pregnant women face threats and pressure to abort their child. Upon refusal, women in the United States have reported being slapped, punched and threatened, including with deadly weapons, until they consent to abortion. Others have been assaulted and subjected to violent assaults directed at destroying the child in the womb or have been given abortion inducing drugs without their knowledge or consent.

In the area of **Women and health** extra measures are needed to ensure that women have equal access to health care and to specialized maternal care. As women experience life's milestones of pregnancy and childbirth they should not be made to feel second class to men, or be penalized for their unique procreative capacity. Yet negative attitudes against pregnancy and motherhood persist despite the statement in paragraph 29 of the Platform that includes: *"Maternity, motherhood, parenting and the role of women in procreation must not be a basis for discrimination nor restrict the full participation of women in society."*

Women deserve policies and programs to assist them and ensure that they and their children survive and thrive.

The progress in providing skilled birth assistance and access to emergency obstetric care must continue. Complications from childbirth, especially blood loss, need to be prevented and treated. Increased access to pre-natal care will continue to save lives of both mothers and children.

The Platform recognized the need for women and girls to have access to nutritious food, an area that has intensified in urgency given growing evidence of the critical importance of adequate nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life—from conception to the second birthday—in saving the lives of women and children and improving the prosperity of a country. The Lancet series *Maternal and Child Nutrition* issued an urgent plea to governments to make nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life, and for all women of child-bearing age, the center of the new development goals.

When women of child-bearing age are well-nourished they are healthier and able to provide nourishment for the child in the womb, helping to ensure healthy physical and cognitive development. Healthy children are empowered to become

healthy adults who are better equipped to make meaningful contributions to their families, society and country.

Women are the heart of the family. They are the caregivers. They care for children in the womb and after birth; they care for the sick, disabled, and elderly. Women commit themselves to the very survival of others. Yet, at times this critical work is not compensated or valued for its innate worth and contribution to affirming the dignity of each human person.

In his Letter to Women issued during the Fourth World Conference on Women, Saint John Paul II affirmed the dignity of women stating, *"Necessary emphasis should be placed on the "genius of women,"... For in giving themselves to others each day, women fulfill their deepest vocation. Perhaps more than men, women acknowledge the person, because they see persons with their hearts. They see them independently of various ideological or political systems. They see others in their greatness and limitations; they try to go out to them and help them."*

We call to mind the recommendation of the General Assembly in Resolution S-23/3 paragraph 98c that action be taken at the national and international levels to: *"Promote respect for the right of women and men to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Recognize the central role that religion, spirituality and belief play in the lives of millions of women and men;"*

As the post 2015 agenda is determined and the sustainable development goals reach agreement, it is essential to include acknowledgement and affirmation of the universal and central roles that religion and religious beliefs have in the daily lives of women and men throughout the world as recommended by the General Assembly. Religion and spirituality give meaning and purpose to life, affirm the dignity of each and every human being, and contribute to the overall well-being of an individual—the ultimate purpose of development.