

**Commission on Status of Women
Sixtieth Session**

Priority theme: Women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development

Statement submitted by Priests for Life, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

Priests for Life believes that the empowerment of women is fundamental to achieving sustainable development and requires continued focus, urgency and leadership to provide women and girls with access to education, economic opportunities, job training and financial opportunities, including microcredit loans. Progress is needed to further reduce maternal and newborn mortality, reduce the number of women living in poverty, and protect women and girls from violence and abuse including from sex selective abortion, infanticide, and sex trafficking.

Progress is needed to provide for women's basic needs which continue to be unmet around the world, hindering empowerment and sustainable development. Lack of clean water supplies that are easily utilized and in close proximity to where women live, poor sanitation and hygiene and unhealthy cooking methods negatively impact women's daily lives and health and their ability to receive an education or have a job outside the home.

Educational opportunities need to continue to increase globally; education empowers women and girls to make informed decisions for themselves, their families and their communities. Economic empowerment, including access to vocational and skill training and job opportunities, is necessary. Education and economic empowerment help women to enjoy full participation as citizens with equal access to resources and opportunities.

Good health is essential to women's empowerment. Women need greater access to health care for prevention and treatment of disease and disorders including malaria, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, anemia, malaria, cardiovascular disease, tuberculosis, epilepsy, and diabetes—all factors that increase the risk of maternal death.

Nutrition is key to women's health and empowerment, to sustainable development and to future generations who can be freed from the cycle of malnutrition and stunted growth. When women of child-bearing age are well-nourished they are healthier and better able to provide nourishment for their children in the womb, able to successfully and exclusively breastfeed, and to make nutritious food choices for children under age two; all essential to ensuring children's healthy physical and cognitive development.

Twenty years ago the Beijing 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 lives, enhancing healthy outcomes, and improving the prosperity of a country.

When children thrive, they are empowered to become healthy adults who are better equipped to make meaningful contributions to their families, society, and country. Tragically, at least 3.1 million children die each year from malnutrition and more than 800,000 babies—one in four newborns—dies because she or he is born too soon or too small as a result of poor maternal nutrition.

The Beijing Platform also recognized that 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 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."

The quest for "healthy reproduction" is universal. Continued progress around the world is needed to empower women in the role of mother with the maternal health care they need during pregnancy and childbirth to ensure that they and their children survive and thrive.

The progress in reducing maternal deaths has been achieved by measures that include providing skilled birth assistance and access to emergency obstetric care. These must continue. Complications from childbirth, especially blood loss, need to be prevented and treated. Increased access to pre-natal care saves the lives of both mothers and children.

Women are the heart of the family, the foundation of society. They hold the role of "caregiver", along with many other responsibilities. 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 and contribute to the overall well-being of the individual—the ultimate purpose of development. Yet, at times this critical work is not valued or compensated for its innate worth and its critical contribution to development.

Women need to be empowered in all their critical roles. Men and boys need to respect women and girls and assist in their efforts toward equality and empowerment in order to achieve transformational cultural change that respects women and girls and protects them from violence.

Violence and discrimination, tragically, continue to occur throughout the girl's life cycle taking different forms in different cultures.

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 this practice 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 outrageous act of discrimination against the girl child as the sex selection abortion practice is growing in countries and among ethnic groups 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” reflecting an anti-girl attitude that grossly undermines women’s empowerment.

The Platform, paragraph 38, also recognized that son preference bias not only discriminates against girls and limits her access 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”.

Failure to protect girls in law from prenatal sex selection as recommended to governments in paragraph 283d of the Platform—“Enact and enforce legislation protecting girls from all forms of violence, including female infanticide and prenatal sex selection”—begins the discrimination and disempowerment 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.

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 sought to reduce 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 —has led to increased violence as women are kidnapped, forced into sex trafficking, and sold as brides and girls are forced into prostitution as countries struggle with significant numbers of “missing girls”.

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, and boys, are protected from abortion and guaranteed their right to life. It is our belief that the lives of all newly created individuals deserve respect, protection and non-discrimination, no exceptions.

Priest for Life views abortion as a sign that governments and societies have failed to meet the needs of women.

Access to abortion on demand, whether in the context of “reproductive health” or “reproductive rights”, or as a component of population control, does not have universal support, is not a universally recognized right, and is opposed and restricted by many countries. Health care should be life-affirming; it should not end the life of one of the patients and potentially injure the other.

Priests for Life believes that women deserve sustainable development programs and policies that help advance women’s empowerment and provide for “healthy reproduction” that treats every newly created life, including preborn baby girls, with dignity, beginning “at the earliest stages of life.”