



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the 18th Session of the Human Rights Council - Item 3
“Practices in adopting a human rights-based approach to eliminate preventable maternal mortality and human rights”
Geneva, 15 September 2011

Madam President,

The delegation of the Holy See has reviewed with careful attention the Report on *“Practices in adopting a human rights-based approach to eliminate preventable maternal mortality and human rights,”*¹ the 2010 Resolution 15/17 of the Human Rights Council on *“Preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights: follow-up to Council resolution 11/8”* as well as the Resolution 11/8². The latter resolution expressed “grave concern at the unacceptably high global rate of preventable maternal mortality and morbidity”, recognized this phenomenon as a “health, development and human rights challenge,” and encouraged States and other relevant stakeholders, including national human rights institutions and non-governmental organizations, to give “increased attention and resources to preventable maternal mortality and morbidity” in the context of the engagement to protect human rights.

Despite such strongly articulated commitments, however, the international community must recognize, with deep regret, that it has made insufficient progress in preventing some 350,000 deaths that occur annually during pregnancy and childbirth. Thus, my Delegation believes it necessary to affirm, once again, that “every woman is equal in dignity to man, and a full member of the human family, within which she has a distinctive place and vocation that is complementary to but in no way less valuable than man’s”.³

My Delegation is pleased to note three of the “common features of good and effective practices to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity” to which attention was called by the report being discussed today: 1) Broad social and legal changes to enhance

¹ A/HRC/18/27, 8 July 2011

² Human Rights Council, 15th Session, Resolution 15/17. Preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights: follow-up to resolution 11/8, 7 October 2010; 11th Session, Resolution 11/8, June 2009.

³ Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to the Secretary General of the International Conference on Population and Development, from the Vatican, 18 March 1994, paragraph 8,
http://vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp_ii_let_19031994_populations-develop_en.html

women's status by promoting equality between men and women, elimination of early age marriage and the consequent promotion of delay in onset of sexual activities, improvement of social, economic, health, and nutritional status of women and girls, and elimination of such harmful practices as female genital mutilation and domestic violence; 2) Strengthening health systems and primary health care to improve access to, and use of, skilled birth attendants and emergency obstetric care for complications; and 3) Improving monitoring and evaluation of State obligations to ensure the accountability of all actors and to implement policies.

The Catholic Church maintains an extensive network of health services in all parts of the world and, in particular, offers outreach to poor and rural communities that often are excluded from access to government-sponsored services. Some Catholic organizations have developed specialized services for fistula repair, provide holistic treatment and societal re-integration of the victims of domestic violence, and promote integral development and education of women and girls. Moreover, Catholic organizations are active in advocacy, on global, regional, national, and local levels, for policies and practices that protect the rights of women and girls. Thus my Delegation wishes to assure you, Madam President, of its strong support for the above-mentioned elements of good practice.

With regard to two other elements proposed by the report as so-called "features of good practice" to reduce maternal morbidity and mortality – that is "increasing access to contraception and family planning" and addressing so-called "unsafe abortion for women", the Holy See wishes to express its strong disagreement. My delegation believes that "... particular attention should be given to securing for husband and wife the liberty to decide responsibly, free from all social or legal coercion, the number of children they will have and the spacing of their births. It should be the intent of governments or other agencies to decide for couples but, rather, to create the social conditions which will enable them to make appropriate decisions in the light of their responsibilities to God, to themselves, and to the society of which they are part, and to the objective moral order."⁴ We believe, moreover, that "abortion, which destroys existing human life, ... is never an acceptable method of family planning, as was recognized by consensus at the Mexico City United Nations International Conference on Population (1984)." Thus, we find it totally unacceptable for so-called "safe abortion" to be promoted by the Report being discussed during the current Session of the Human Rights Council or, perhaps even more significantly, by the United Nations *Global Strategy for Women's and Children Health*, launched by the UN Secretary General in September 2010.

Madam President,

⁴ Letter of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II to the Secretary General of the International Conference on Population and Development, *op.cit.*, paragraph, 3.

the above-cited concerns are substantiated by evidence-based data. The World Health Organization (WHO) has demonstrated that women in Africa die primarily from five major causes: hypertensive diseases, obstructed labour, hemorrhage, sepsis and infection, and HIV-related diseases⁵. The interventions known to address such medical crises include training and employment of skilled birth attendants, provision of antibiotics and uterotonic medications, and improvement of blood banking. My Delegation finds totally unacceptable any attempts to divert much-needed financial resources from these effective and life-saving interventions to increased programmed of contraception and abortion, which aim at limiting procreation of new life or at destroying the life of a child.

In conclusion, the Holy See Delegation expresses the firm hope that the international community will succeed in reducing maternal morbidity and mortality by promoting effective interventions that are based on deep and abiding values as well as on scientific and medical knowledge and that are respectful of the sacredness of life from conception to natural death, for “[t]he presence of a mother within the family is so important for the stability and growth of this fundamental cell of society, that it should be recognized, commended and supported in every possible way.”⁶

⁵ Khalid S. Khan *et al.*, “WHO Analysis of Causes of Maternal Deaths: A Systematic Review,” *Lancet*, 367 (2006): 1066-1074.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Address at Meeting with Catholic Movements for the Promotion of Women, Parish of St. Anthony, in Luanda, Angola, 22 March 2009, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090322_promozione-donna_en.html