



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 29th Session of the Human Rights Council:
Full-Day Discussion on the Human Rights of Women
Geneva, 19 June 2015

Mr. President,

The Holy See Delegation is pleased to take part in this important full-day discussion on the Human Rights of Women as called for in Resolution 26/15, for the continued promotion, protection and support, of women's human rights. There is still much to be done to arrive at the recognition of the equal human dignity that women possess and to acknowledging the necessary role that women play in society on the level of family and in social and political life. We are all too aware of the violations of women's human rights and dignity in many parts of the world, where they are subject to second class social status or where they are victims of modern forms of slavery, including sex trafficking, early and forced marriages, lack of access to equal education, employment and wage discrimination, domestic violence and forced prostitution, among others.¹ Women and children are the most vulnerable in conflict situations wherein there is forced migration or displacement,² and in which, at times, they have been specifically targeted, kidnapped and systematically raped³. These ongoing abuses, coupled with the reality of new, modern, forms of slavery challenge the international community to continue to seek the path to realize the equal respect for women's dignity and the elimination of discrimination. This requires a renewed look at our social, political and cultural perspectives which, at times, incorporate a less than proper appreciation of women. As Pope Francis states, "Think of the many forms of male dominance whereby the woman was considered second class. Think of the exploitation and the commercialization of the female body in the current media culture. And let us also think of the recent epidemic of distrust, skepticism, and even hostility that is spreading in our culture — in particular an understandable distrust from women — on the part of a covenant between man and woman that is capable, at the same time, of refining the intimacy of communion and of guarding the dignity of difference."⁴

The Holy See is most convinced that the fundamental equality of man and woman, and therefore the equality of their fundamental human rights, is rooted in the inviolable dignity of the human person. As such, any ideology or social policy, any culture that subjugates women, that relegates them to second class, or "less than human", is in no way tolerable. To accept and to practice such a mentality is not only contrary to the equality of man and woman, but effectively demeans even the dignity of the male sex. The fundamental dignity, intrinsic to the human person, male and female, is as such that to degrade one is necessarily a belittling of the other.

¹ Cfr. <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

² Cfr. <http://www.un.org/en/letsfightracism/women.shtml>

³ Intervention of the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN, United Nations Security Council Open Debate on "Women Peace Security", New York, 15 April 2015.

⁴ Pope Francis, General Audience, 22 April 2015.

This basic principle of equality stands as the foundation for properly understanding the complementarity of man and woman. The insistence upon the equality of sexes does not in any way inhibit the recognition of the distinction of them. On the contrary, the distinction of man and woman calls us to acknowledge uniqueness in their differences and a positive and mutual complementarity among them. “‘Male’ and ‘female’ differentiate two individuals of equal dignity, which does not however reflect a static equality, because the specificity of the female is different from the specificity of the male, and this difference in equality is enriching and indispensable for the harmony of life in society.”⁵ The path to overcoming discrimination, abuses of women’s human rights and equality, should not be sought through the obfuscation of the complementarity in equality, but precisely in supporting it. “We have not yet understood in depth what the feminine genius can give us, what woman can give to society.”⁶

The desire on the part of much of the international community to achieve an equal recognition of women’s human rights should not fail to take into consideration the equality of every human person and the complementarity of man and woman. It may appear that any and every approach and perspective to bring about the desired equality and non-discrimination are equally effective. Approaches to attain equality and non-discrimination by eliminating the distinctions based on sex, cannot fully respect and appreciate the inherent dignity of the human person. Ideologies that attempt to erase the distinction of man and woman to arrive at a “non-gender common denominator” ultimately diminish the value of both the female and the male gender.⁷ The approach should not attempt to find equal rights by way of eliminating the specificity of man and woman, but stressing their equality and their complementarity. As Pope Francis remarked: “Modern contemporary culture has opened new spaces, new forms of freedom and new depths in order to enrich the understanding of this difference [between man and woman]. But it has also introduced many doubts and much skepticism. For example, I ask myself if the so-called gender theory is not, at the same time, an expression of frustration and resignation, which seeks to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it. (...) The removal of difference in fact creates a problem, not a solution.”⁸ Extreme interpretations on both ends of the spectrum should be avoided. Either of reducing the character of womanhood to a merely social role or of the opposite extreme of “emancipating” women from their unique and precious feminine attributes, prove to be a disservice to understanding the true role of woman and their indispensable characteristics and contributions to all levels and aspects of social life.

The Holy See Delegation remains optimistic that the international community will continue to strive to promote the human rights of women from an approach that is truly worthy and deserving of the human person. Much progress has already been made as witnessed by the growing number of women in important political and social roles such as Presidents, Heads of Government, Ministers, Members of Parliament, Ambassadors and many other professional positions. “There is no doubt that we must do far more to advance women, if we want to give more strength to the reciprocity between man and woman. In fact, it is necessary that woman not only be listened to more, but that her voice carry real weight, a recognized authority in society.”⁹

Thank you, Mr. President.

⁵ Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching, n. 146.

⁶ Pope Francis, General Audience, 15 April 2015.

⁷ The interpretation of the term *gender* here is to be understood as set out in the Holy See’s Final Statement at the Women’s Conference in Beijing, 15 September 1995.

⁸ Pope Francis, General Audience, 15 April 2015.

⁹ Pope Francis, General Audience, 15 April 2015.