



THE HOLY SEE
2015 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Working Session 5: Tolerance and non-discrimination I:
Equal opportunity for women and men in all spheres of life
Wednesday, September 23, 2015

Mr. Moderator,

Two years ago we marked the 25th Anniversary of St. John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* on the dignity and vocation of women in the Church and in society, which is a landmark document from papal teaching dedicated exclusively to women. It represents a strong call to all Christians to commit themselves to bringing the novelty of Christianity – the proclamation that men and women share equal dignity and responsibility – into places where women remain discriminated against, are undervalued or considered inferior simply because they are women.

The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* was followed by the 1995 World Day of Peace Message, directed especially to women, in which Pope John Paul II stresses that “the growing presence of women in social, economic and political life at the local, national and international levels is a very positive development. Women have a full right to become actively involved in all areas of public life, and this right must be affirmed and guaranteed, also, where necessary, through appropriate legislation... This acknowledgment of the public role of women should not however detract from their unique role within the family. Here their contribution to the welfare and progress of society, even if its importance is not sufficiently appreciated, is truly incalculable” (*Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the XXVIII World Day of Peace, Women: Teachers of Peace*, 9).

In his 1995 Letter to women, St. John Paul II also reflects on the role of women in society and on the obstacles that prevent them from fairly bringing their full participation to social, political and economic life:

“And what shall we say of the obstacles which in so many parts of the world still keep women from being fully integrated into social, political and economic life? We need only think of how the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded, even though humanity owes its very survival to this gift. Certainly, much remains to be done to prevent discrimination against those who have chosen to be wives and mothers. As far as personal rights are concerned, there is an urgent need to achieve *real equality* in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights and the recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties of citizens in a democratic State.

This is a matter of justice but also of necessity. Women will increasingly play a part in the solution of the serious problems of the future: leisure time, the quality of life, migration, social services, euthanasia, drugs, health care, the ecology, etc. In all these areas a greater presence of women in society will prove most valuable, for it will help to manifest the contradictions present when society is organized solely according to the criteria of efficiency and productivity, and it will force systems to be redesigned in a way which favours the processes of humanization which mark the ‘civilization of love’” (*Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, 4).

Mr. Moderator,

My Delegation acknowledges with appreciation the progress achieved in the last few decades, and the greater presence and participation of women in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres. Today, women all over the globe, especially in Westernized societies, find themselves, historically speaking, in an unprecedented situation: they are highly educated and are engaged in professions outside the home. The role of the Catholic Church in this development merits underlining. From the start, Christianity posits equality between women and men unparalleled within the societies of the time. Indeed, the Church, from the very beginning of its school system, has always placed major emphasis on the education of girls and women, and still today the Church remains a leading educator, including in the developing world.

However, even today women are not infrequently discriminated against in the competition for obtaining jobs or keeping them. Too often the demands of the workplace prejudice women in combining parenthood with a successful career, compelling them to choose between these in a way men are not similarly forced to do. In the same way that fatherhood and family are not mutually exclusive for men, neither should the choice for motherhood be considered an obstacle to women's self-realization in the workplace, especially when we consider the essential role of the family for society in educating and suitably rearing its next generation. Therefore, for both women and men, the choice of children and family should be seen as a common responsibility, and certainly not as an unwelcome obstacle to productivity in the workplace. In fact, the choice of mothers - or even of fathers in some cases - to stay at home for the benefit of small children should not be interpreted as something to be curtailed to the maximum extent possible, but rather as something transformative for the greater good of society and its future generations.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that "motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance" and that the "family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State." Hence, what is needed is a strong political will, followed by policies, measures and concrete actions to ensure the conditions that will reconcile family and working life. Failing this, there emerges another risk: to perpetuate not only the inequality between men and women but additionally between women who are mothers and those who are not. In the social agreement between business, trade unions and government, therefore, an explicit 'family tailored model' should be sought with a view to producing better quality of life for families without coming at the expenses of the workplace.

Mr. Moderator,

Let me conclude by once again acknowledging the contribution of "the feminine genius", a beautiful expression used not only by Saint John Paul II, but also by Pope Francis, for the progress and benefit of our society and, in particular, whenever and wherever important decisions are made for the common interest and common good of all.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.