



**DICASTERIUM
PRO LAICIS, FAMILIA ET VITA**

CSW69 SIDE EVENT ON SEX-SELECTIVE PRACTICES

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Honourable Minister,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here with you today to attend this event on the sidelines of the first week of the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). I thank the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations in New York for the kind invitation and Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) International for co-organizing this meeting on Sex-Selective Practices.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA), we have the opportunity to reaffirm our shared commitment to promote effective equality between men and women and to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women, which are always an obstacle to justice and peace.

Sex selective practices against girls, both before and after birth, are still today a widespread issue in many regions of the world, despite the Platform for Action adopted in Beijing condemned this gravest form of violence and suppression of human life. Female pre-implantation selection, selective abortions, female infanticide, dowry-related murders and lack of care for girls and mothers in the post-natal period, are the most common.

Recent studies, published in prestigious international scientific journals, report that if we do not take adequate action measures to stop sex-selective practices, there will be a deficit of more than 4.7 million women and girls between 2021 and 2030.¹ In this sense, a silent "female genocide" is taking place: entire populations of unborn girls are being eliminated simply because they are girls.

It seems noteworthy that in some countries, where such practices have been used for decades and are now severely affected by sex imbalances at birth, the sex ratio is likely to decline: but falling fertility

¹ Cf. F. CHAO ET AL., *Projecting sex imbalances at birth at global, regional and national levels from 2021 to 2100: scenario-based Bayesian probabilistic projections of the sex ratio at birth and missing female births on 3.26 billion birth records*, in *BMJ Global Health* 2021, 6.

rates, ageing of societies and a persistent preference for the male child are clear signs that the problem has not been tackled at its roots. As Pope Francis said, «these roots are cultural and spiritual, growing in the soil of prejudice, of possessiveness, of injustice».²

It is important to say it like it is: the selective killing of women is femicide, that is the killing of women because they are women. In the face of threats to human life, the commitment of the international community is strong and effective when it focuses on the issues at hand in a timely manner and uses simple, clear and common language.³ In this case, it helps us to make sex-selective practices against women more visible, so that they are not perceived as distant and theoretical issues.

Having said that, I would like to draw your attention to three fundamental issues.

First of all, sex-selective practices in themselves raise relevant ethical and legal issues, since they consist in the systematic suppression of human life, before and after birth. Such practices are highly discriminatory and an unjust form of public and private bio-political control over certain persons, whose dignity and basic human rights are effectively denied.

For this reason, sex-selective practices are prohibited by several national legislations. However, there are countries where they are still practiced and even legally permissible and socially tolerated against girls and women, for medical, social, economic or inheritance reasons, family-balancing reasons or self-determining reasons on the part of couples. In countries where sex selective practices are banned, *son-preference* continues to be seen as a rational choice, and ends up justifying sex differential treatment of offspring. Laws have generally failed to be effective, especially in rural areas or among lawless groups, such as ghettoized migrant workers in cities, despite education efforts. Indeed, subtle *male privilege* is still present in many social structures. That's why we have to recognize that even today - as the Beijing Platform for Action stated in 1995 - discrimination against women begins before birth⁴.

The issue is much more complex than it seems and has huge implications: in countries where a sex demographic imbalance has been identified, these practices led to the spread of trafficking in women (for men who cannot pay a dowry or who cannot find a spouse because of the demographic imbalance between men and women); but also forced prostitution, child marriage, reproductive coercion, polyandry,⁵ domestic violence, discrimination against daughters in health and nutrition. In this sense, violence against women has been documented as a *pervasive global phenomenon* and a significant violation of human rights.

Secondly, access to modern reproductive technologies and to legal abortion is a major contributor to the spread of such practices, encouraging “reproductive tourism” from those countries that prohibit sex-selection, including among couples with high average levels of education. Sex-selective technologies combined with limited restrictions on abortion make it much easier than in the past, for

² FRANCIS, *Message for the national campaign against violence against women*, organized by Rai Radio1 Gr1 & CADMI D.I.RE, 09.11.2023. Also BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the participants in the international convention on the theme "Woman and man, the humanum in its entirety"*, 9 February 2008: «There are still places and cultures where women are discriminated against or undervalued for the sole fact of being women, where recourse is made even to religious arguments and family, social and cultural pressure in order to maintain the inequality of the sexes».

³ FRANCIS, *Address to members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, 9 January 2025.

⁴ World Conference on Women “Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action” (1995), 39.

⁵ Cf. C. COYLE ET AL., *The relationship of abortion and violence against women: violence prevention strategies and research needs*, in *Issues in Law and Medicine*, 2015, 30, 2, 111-127.

couples with a strong preference for sons to resort to sex-selective abortion. In fact, it can be used not only in the case of X-linked diseases, but in the presence of any form of risk, to which a selective choice can be linked to the use of preimplantation genetic diagnosis, prenatal diagnosis and female feticide.

Insofar as advanced reproductive technologies remove the moral turpitude of sex-based selection by reframing it as a “scientific” endeavor, they make it an issue of justice in relation to “missing girls”.

The selective mentality, the abundance of embryos produced in ‘in vitro fertilization’ cycles - which encourages any kind of selection - the alleged “right to a child”, regrettably legitimized by some rulings of national and international courts, which can give rise to different legal claims, even with regard to the characteristics of the child, in fact result in a form of discrimination and violence against those who are discarded.

However, the discerning jurist knows that there is no “right to a child” in the strict legal sense, that can justify any procreative practice⁶, especially when it comes to the power to kill children before and after birth.

The legitimization of any form of suppression of human life expresses an imbalance of rights that is openly denied to those who are most fragile, voiceless, little girls still hidden in their mother’s womb or under observation ‘in vitro’.

This is the main problem: the widespread legal liberalization of abortion removes any possibility of restricting selective practices during pregnancy, which can be easily disguised by using abortion for any purpose and on the basis of any prejudice⁷.

We should bear in mind that there is a scarcity of data in this area to enable us to make real estimates of the impact of these practices on the phenomenon of prenatal female selection. In fact, it is not uncommon to find underreporting of both female births and female selection practices all around the world.

This is a serious legal issue, that requires urgent consideration by States and international bodies in order to more effectively prohibit such practices. The dry debates in the ethical-medical literature on the need to find well-founded utilitarian reasons, to prove the harm caused by these sex-selective practices, in order to prohibit them, are confronted with the evidence of the facts: such practices are not only an instrument of selection of the human being *per se*, but also of very serious violence and discrimination against women and a violation of their fundamental human rights, first of all the right to life.

⁶ Cf. DICASTERY FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Declaration “Dignitas infinita” on human dignity*, 25 March 2024, 49.

⁷ Cf. S. PURI, *The ethics of sex selection: a comparison of the attitudes and experiences of primary care physicians and physician providers of clinical sex selection services*, in *Fertility and Sterility*, 2010, 93, 7, 2017-2114.

Third issue. Prenatal female selection and infanticide are heinous crimes against motherhood, which destroy women's freedom to be mothers⁸ and deprive them of a profound anthropological dimension, such as maternal identity⁹, as stated in the Beijing Platform for Action¹⁰.

Many kinds of psychological pressures may translate in coerced abortion. In some countries, it is still a social norm for the family to force the pregnant woman to have an abortion and if she does not cooperate, she faces domestic violence. In this way, the "desired" family is produced at the expense of daughters and mothers. In this sense, sex selective practices have been defined as a "crime of silence", a taboo: they underlie a complex reality of oppression, inequality and abuse. They are the last act, a decision that grows out of a mentality in which the human being is made the object of the decisions of others¹¹.

The question refers to the gaze the way in which we, as an international community, look at the human being¹². To see personal, social, economic advantages or disadvantages in the life of a girl is to attribute to women a mere utilitarian value, subject to cost-benefit evaluation by third parties. It is contrary to respect for the human dignity to reduce the person to waste material.

Human reason alone - now supported by scientific evidence - is sufficient to recognize the value of every human life, from conception¹³. The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also affirms that dignity is inherent to all members of the human family: 'inherent' means that it does not depend on birth, but belongs to every human being from the first moment of his or her existence, it is «intrinsic to the person»;¹⁴ it permits no distinction or discrimination, and it is the basis of the right to life of every human being¹⁵.

Any form of anthropological reductionism is a serious threat to respect for fundamental human rights, which can be relativized and applied in a discriminatory manner from case to case. In the same way, any exception to the principle of respect for human life constitutes a breach into which, by analogy, other very serious forms of selection and violence against the human person, especially against women, can creep.

The progress of humanity has now made us acutely aware of the shared responsibility and duty we have politically, legislatively, socially and culturally to intervene effectively where women are still 'invisible' and 'last', before and after birth: no child can be considered «a mistake or guilty of existing»¹⁶. Today, we are struggling to understand the gravity of these crimes, especially when they

⁸ Cf. FRANCIS, *Address to participants in the Conference "Yes to Life! - Taking care of the precious gift of life in its frailty"* organized by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, 25 May 2019.

⁹ Cf. *Dignitas infinita*, 50.

¹⁰ Beijing Platform for Action, 29.

¹¹ Cf. See *Dignitas infinita*, 47.

¹² «The man-woman relationship in its respective specificity, and reciprocity [...] certainly constitutes a central point of the "anthropological question", so decisive in contemporary culture and ultimately for every culture». BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the participants in the international convention on the theme "Woman and man, the humanum in its entirety"*, 9 February 2008.

¹³ *Dignitas infinita*, 49, reaffirms the fundamental dignity of every human being from the moment of conception and his or her right to be recognized for himself or herself and never as a tool for something else.

¹⁴ *Dignitas infinita*, 14-15.

¹⁵ Cf. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, artt. 2-3-7.

¹⁶ FRANCIS, *Address to members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, 9 January 2025.

are linked to abortion, the perception of which has gradually been erased from the collective consciousness¹⁷.

The international community must therefore feel called to reflect on the urgency of establishing a universal ban on all forms of sex-selective practices, both before and after birth, and to call for action even on those laws that, by liberalizing abortion, have effectively removed sex-selective practices from any possibility of control. The human rights system is above any national law, and with regard to sex-selective practices, the entire international community must make a coordinated and concrete commitment¹⁸ to recognize what remains to be done to ensure that the right to life of girls before and after birth is respected.

It will be necessary to change social and economic paradigms, as well as to promote educational and behavioral models, that will help to change stereotypes and prejudices in the new generations, valuing reciprocity and equality between men and women, in every stage and circumstance of life, within and outside the family. Changing is essential if we are to lay together the foundations of a more fraternal world¹⁹, not only among peoples, but also between men and women.

In his address to members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See this year, Pope Francis called each of us to be heralds of a *diplomacy of hope*. The ‘dense clouds of war’ – of which he spoke – are about the arduous struggle of humanity to defend human life against all kinds of weapons, including those of sexual selection. These clouds can be swept away. This means working for an international law, that respects the right to life of every human being, from conception to natural death. It is in the folds of this fragile right, that violence against women still creeps in today.

Thank you for your attention.

¹⁷ Cf. *Dignitas infinita*, 47.

¹⁸ Cf. *Dignitas infinita*, 46.

¹⁹ FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* on fraternity and social friendship, 8.