



BOLLETTINO

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INTERVENTO DELLA SANTA SEDE ALLA 61^{ma} SESSIONE DELL'ASSEMBLEA GENERALE DELLE NAZIONI UNITE SULLA PROMOZIONE DELL'UGUAGLIANZA E DELL'AMPLIAMENTO DEI POTERI ALLE DONNE

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Pubblichiamo di seguito l'intervento che l'Osservatore Permanente della Santa Sede, l'Arcivescovo S.E. Mons. Celestino Migliore, Nunzio Apostolico, ha pronunciato ieri a New York davanti alla 61^{ma} Sessione dell'Assemblea Generale delle Nazioni Unite sul "*Informal Thematic Debate on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women*":

• INTERVENTO DI S.E. MONS. CELESTINO MIGLIORE

Madam President,

At the outset, my delegation thanks you for convening this *Informal Thematic Debate of the General Assembly on the Promotion of Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women*, and its subsequent panel debates on *women in decision-making and empowerment of women* including microfinance. This timely debate is a significant contribution to the reflections on the issues of the dignity, rights and duties of women and to their role and achievements in the various sectors of society.

The legitimate quest for equality between men and women has achieved positive results in the area of equality of rights. This quest needs to be accompanied by the awareness that equality goes hand in hand with and does not endanger, much less contradict, the recognition of both the difference and complementarity between men and women. Without this recognition the struggle for equality would not be authentic.

It seems, in fact, that oftentimes the ideas on the equality of rights between men and women have been marked by an antagonistic approach which exalts opposition between them. This approach juxtaposes woman against man and vice-versa, while the identity and role of one is emphasized with the aim of merely diminishing that of the other. Success in the quest for equality and the empowerment of women can best be achieved when such antagonism gives way to mutual respect and recognition of the identity and the role of one towards the other.

A second tendency is to blur, if not entirely deny, the differences between men and women. In order to avoid the domination of one sex over the other, their differences tend to be obscured or viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. Physical difference is often minimized, while the purely cultural dimension is maximized and held to be primary. This blurring of differences has impact on the stability of society and of families and, not least, on the quality of the relations between men and women. Equality between women and men and the empowerment of women will be attained when the differences of the sexes are recognized and highlighted as complementary and the cultural element of gender is understood in its proper context.

Empowerment of women refers to increasing their social, political, economic and spiritual strength, both individually and collectively, as well as to removing the obstacles that penalize women and prevent them from being fully integrated into the various sectors of society. Concretely, it means addressing discriminatory practices that exclude women from decision-making processes, oftentimes caused or aggravated by discrimination based on a woman's race, ethnicity, religion or social status. That women in society must be involved in decision-making is not only right for reasons of equality, but also for the specific insights that women bring to the process. This "feminine genius" will prove most valuable, as women increasingly play major roles in the solution of the serious challenges the world is facing. Empowerment of women also means equal pay for equal work, fairness in career advancement, and equality of spouses in family rights. Likewise, it means that women who choose to be wives and mothers are protected and not penalized.

With regard to empowering women through microfinance, my delegation takes pride in the fact that for decades some institutions and agencies of the Catholic Church have been active in microfinancing. Just to cite one example, Catholic Relief Services, which operates in 99 countries from all continents, began microfinance programmes in 1988 in five countries. Now programmes are operational in at least thirty countries, with more than 850,000 clients, of whom almost 75% are women. The programme focuses on the poor, especially poor women, in remote rural communities where there is no access to financial services. Moreover, in order to build managerial capacities and assure programme sustainability, the clients are directly involved in the management and administration of the services they receive.

Studies have shown how microfinance has led to a wide-ranging improvement of the status of women, from earning greater respect from men to being acknowledged as society's important contributors; from achieving better family health to greater awareness of the value of education; from greater self-esteem to taking a leading role in poverty reduction. These and other positive effects on the daily life of women tell us that microfinance is warmly to be supported. However, we must be aware that it is hardly a panacea for all the ills afflicting women in developing countries. Further, the system is not immune from abuse. It is, in fact, noted that in some circumstances and places, men ask their wives to get loans from microfinanciers, and then they take the loan and run the business themselves, or even, use the money for other purposes.

Hand in hand with the empowering benefits brought about by initiatives like microfinance, goes the need for education and awareness-raising, especially at the level of the local community. Education for women in particular remains the most vital tool in the promotion of equality between men and women and in the empowerment of women to contribute fully to society. The Holy See desires for its part to continue to educate boys and girls, men and women, to foster and uphold the dignity, role and rights of women. With tools such as these, women's empowerment can begin to take root and flourish in those places where it is still largely lacking.

Thank you, Madam President.

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