

U.N. women's group's work not yet complete

UNITED NATIONS - While lauding the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women for adopting resolutions on ending female genital mutilation and addressing forced and early marriage, its work is not complete until it also addresses "the important issues of prenatal sex selection, infanticide and son preference," said Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Vatican's permanent observer to the U.N.

"The practice of sex selective abortions is not a new practice. The international community has raised this issue during the major conference on women. Even recent reports by the U.N. secretary-general have continued to raise this as an issue of concern that must be addressed," said Archbishop Migliore in a March 7 statement.

"Despite its importance, the Commission on the Status of Women has remained silent on prenatal sex selection, infanticide and son preference," he added, saying "the time has come" for the commission "to break the silence on these important issues."

In a separate March 7 address during a U.N. debate on the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, Archbishop Migliore touted the use of microfinance, the practice of lending small amounts of money to women to start businesses.

He said his delegation "takes pride in the fact that for decades some institutions and agencies of the Catholic Church have been active in microfinancing."

For example, Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency, began such programs in 1988 with five countries, the archbishop said.

"Now programs are operational in at least 30 countries, with more than 850,000 clients, of whom almost 75 percent are women," he added.

"Studies have shown how microfinance has led to a wide-ranging improvement on

the status of women,” he said, “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.”

Still, Archbishop Migliore said, the programs are not immune from abuse: “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.”

In his U.N. address, he said two problems affect women’s “legitimate quest for equality”: “an antagonistic approach which exalts opposition” between men and women, and a tendency “to blur, if not entirely deny, the differences between men and women.”

Archbishop Migliore said the “feminine genius” will come more into play “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,” he added. “Likewise, it means that women who chose to be wives and mothers are protected and not penalized.”