

II. The 4th United Nations World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995

1. Context of the Conference

The 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing in early September 1995, took place amid high expectations because it was a huge international event taking place in China, a country hitherto known for its isolation from the rest of the world. The attitude of the great nation of China towards the rest of the world was beginning to show signs of a certain openness while its economy revealed signs of rapid growth. The Chinese government granted thousands of visas to participants, journalists, observers and members of NGOs who participated in a parallel event held in Huairou, 55 km from Beijing.

The 4th Conference took place in a rather particular global political context. In 1995 only a few years had passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, a context which opened up new challenges and new opportunities. No longer under the constant threat of global conflict, an era of new and improved international relations had begun, in an international non-confrontational context. This helped create a positive climate so that the conference could be an opportunity for women to become more aware of their dignity. On a positive note, in the vast majority of countries, women already had equality before the law, opportunities for participation in public, economic and political life and access to education. The Conference provided a wonderful opportunity to assess the fruit of this positive global change. Perhaps another factor to be considered in the context of the Conference was the emergence and spread of the internet which favoured the creation of networks between different countries. They could now count on a more immediate form of communication than before.

It is also important to mention as part of the context the other United Nations global conferences that took place in the 90's. The

language they used was notably similar to that used in Beijing. This shows that Beijing was not an isolated event: a common language corresponds to a common stance. The conferences to which we refer are: the Conference on Education for All in Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990, the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, and the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994. The last of these had significant similarities in language and ideas with Beijing.

The Holy See, as already mentioned, sent its own delegation to the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, led by US Professor Mary Ann Glendon, with two Monsignors as deputies, thirteen women and seven men.⁴¹ The delegation worked tirelessly before and during the Conference to make the voice of the Holy See heard. It vigorously called for the promotion of the dignity of women, while highlighting the presence of ideologies that undermined this promotion. Many countries found the presence of the Holy See to be helpful. The clarifications that the delegation offered on many occasions helped to avoid positions being naively taken.

One of the main experiences that we had as members of the Holy See delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was the powerful realisation that nothing was improvised. Already during our preparation for the event, in our study of the documents and attempts to understand which groups, organizations and institutions sustained it, it became clear that Beijing was in a sense, the summit of

⁴¹ Names of the Holy See delegation to the 4th World Conference on Women: Prof. Mary Ann Glendon, head of delegation. Most Rev. Renato R. Martino, titular Archbishop of Segarime, deputy-head of delegation. Msgr. Diarmuid Martin, deputy head of delegation. Delegation members: Msgr. Frank Dewane, Ms Patricia Donahoe, Ms Teresa EE Chooi, Msgr. Peter J. Elliot, Ms Pilar Escudero de Jensen, Ms Janne Haaland Matlary, Ms Claudette Habesch, Ms Kathryn Hawa Hoomkwap, Mr John Klink, Ms Irena Kowalska, Ms Joan Lewis, Msgr. David John Malloy, Dr Joaquín Navarro-Valls, Sr Anne Nguyen Thi Thanh, Ms Gail Quinn, Mr Luis Jensen Acuña, Ms Sheri Rickert, Ms Lucienne Sallé, Ms Kung Si Mi. Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano* Italian edition, 26 August 1995, p.1.

decades of work, carried out consciously and seriously through networks with "missionary awareness" for the cause it aimed to defend and propagate. This finding was reflected in presentations and discussions, and was clearly expressed in the final document, the Platform for Action. As we began to study these issues we discovered that the language used was not there by chance. It included terms such as empowerment, sexual and reproductive health, sexual orientation, etc. that had a background and meaning in English that was difficult to grasp as a concept in other languages⁴².

During the conference there was intense and active pro-abortion, pro-choice and pro-homosexuality lobbying. The Holy See Delegation, in line with a broad group of countries and international leaders,⁴³ focused its efforts on highlighting the contradiction of this mentality with the solemn "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" of 1948. There was widespread concern because the Beijing conference had no authority to question the human rights tradition.⁴⁴

⁴² *Pilar Escudero de Jensen*

⁴³ "Really clear words [those of Queen Fabiola of Belgium in defence of the family as the cornerstone of society], but which many here would have preferred not to have heard. The preparatory documents were silent on the subject of family, and the draft Platform for Action that has to be adopted in Beijing puts into brackets the concept of family as the 'fundamental cell of society'. This is in total contrast with the solemn *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (16.3). We know that brackets in the language of United Nations Conferences tell us that there is no agreement on those points. The Beijing Conference must also clarify whether the Declaration of fifty years ago still has some value for humanity today and in the future". (CARLO DE LUCIA, "A discourse of fundamental value: the intervention of Prof. Mary Ann Glendon, head of the Holy See Delegation" in: *L'Osservatore Romano* Italian edition, 6 September 1995).

⁴⁴ "Participants at the Beijing Conference do not have the authority to undermine the pillars of the human rights tradition', the Holy See Delegation clearly reaffirmed in a statement issued on Saturday morning by spokesman Navarro-Valls..." (CARLO DE LUCIA, "Do not undermine the pillars of the human rights tradition: declaration of the Holy See Delegation at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing", in: *L'Osservatore Romano* Italian edition, 10 September 1995, p.1 and 5)

Some of the topics in which differences can be found between the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the proposals discussed at the 4th Beijing Conference are: the lack of reference to the recognition of human dignity being the foundation of freedom, justice and peace; the omission of marriage as a fundamental right and the concept of family as the cornerstone of society – in Beijing marriage and family were considered in a negative way, being seen rather as an impediment to the fulfilment of women and associated with violence; references to motherhood were marginal or negative in nature – the words mother and motherhood were considered reductive with respect to the full dignity of women, while in 1948 every mother and child was entitled to special care and protection.⁴⁵ Another cause of concern was the tendency to consider women's health problems primarily as problems related to sexuality and "reproduction". There was no attention given to other serious female health problems associated with poverty such as malnutrition, poor access to drinking water, and the precariousness with which many women are forced to approach pregnancy and motherhood. On the other hand, there was condemnation of the absence of any mention of the suffering caused, especially to women, by a growing culture of sexual permissiveness.⁴⁶ This lack of balance in the way enormous

⁴⁵ Cf. CARLO DE LUCIA , cit., p.1 and 5.

⁴⁶ "... the Holy See has expressed its concern regarding a tendency to focus privileged attention and resources on the consideration of health problems related to sexuality, whereas a comprehensive approach to the health of all women would have to place greater emphasis on such questions as poor nutrition, unsafe water and those diseases that afflict millions of women each year, taking a vast toll on mothers and children. The Holy See concurs with the Platform for Action in dealing with questions of sexuality and reproduction where it affirms that changes in the attitudes of both men and women are necessary conditions for achieving equality and that responsibility in sexual matters belongs to both men and women. Women are, moreover, most often the victims of irresponsible sexual behaviour, in terms of personal suffering, of disease, poverty and the deterioration of family life. The Conference document, in the view of my Delegation, is not bold enough in acknowledging the threat to women's health arising from widespread attitudes of sexual permissiveness. The document likewise refrains from challenging societies

emphasis was placed on certain women's problems while completely brushing aside others, no less serious or real, clearly revealed the existence of underlying agendas, thus explaining this unilateral selection. Moreover, attempts were made to remove all reference to religion except when associated with intolerance and extremism. This was in complete contrast with 1948 where the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion was recognised.

During the Conference, partly due to the vigorous efforts of the Holy See Delegation, there was a toning down of the attitude that put into question the issue of the human rights tradition.⁴⁷

The 4th Conference produced two documents: the Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration. The Platform for Action contains a list of the main problems facing women, many of which are very real and demand a response.⁴⁸ Many of the concrete

which have abdicated their responsibility to attempt to change, at their very roots, irresponsible attitudes and behaviour.” (MARY ANN GLENDON, Intervention at the 4th World Conference on Women, Beijing, 5 September 1995, in: *L'Osservatore Romano* Italian edition, 6 September 1995, 7).

⁴⁷ “The clear position adopted Saturday by the Holy See Delegation was not only useful, but ‘appropriate and necessary’... not only are discussions moving at a faster pace, but the contents of the European Union's position has substantially changed. Religion in the final document will be re-introduced in one paragraph the text of which is being finalised. The rights and responsibilities of parents will become an issue that will be of central concern to Europe. As for the family, it has finally been agreed to confirm and reaffirm the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* according to which it is “the fundamental cell of society”. (CARLO DE LUCIA, “Developing countries should not be hostages to foreign debt. Discussions at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing”, in: *L'Osservatore Romano* Italian edition, 11-12 September 1995, p.10).

⁴⁸ “The heart of the Program for Action consists of many provisions that are consonant with Catholic teachings on dignity, freedom, and social justice: those dealing with the needs of women in poverty; with strategies for development, literacy, and education; for ending violence against women; for building a culture of peace; and with providing access for women to employment, land, capital, and technology. Other worthwhile provisions concerned the connection between the feminization of poverty and family disintegration, the relation of environmental

objectives raised here are still valid, can be shared and should be protected with commitment at a local, national and international level.

Twelve of these areas were correctly identified and demand particular attention. They are poverty, education and training, health, violence against women, armed conflict, the economy, decision making, the lack of institutional mechanisms, human rights, media, the environment, and finally the need to pay special attention to girl children. For each of these areas specific targets were set⁴⁹.

However, the final document of the 4th Conference contained ambiguities in the terminology used that gave rise to interpretations that were ideologically imbued. Perhaps the hypothesis could be advanced that, in view of the differences of opinion regarding the implementation of a vision of the world and humanity that conflicted with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this ambiguous terminology was adopted to leave open the possibility for action. The consequences of this have emerged in the last fifteen years: the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action has made way for an interpretation that is anti-life, anti-family, anti-women's priorities and has forged ahead with its proposed change of cultural paradigms.

The aforementioned ambiguity gives rise to the questioning of cultural values such as human and family life, and the mutual man-woman complementarity. These are values that are needed as a basis for any reflection on the dignity and vocation of women.

There is no doubt that some essential points of our culture and tradition were questioned at Beijing. It is worth pointing out once more that these points are non-negotiable values which we know well⁵⁰.

degradation to scandalous patterns of production and consumption, the discrimination against women that begins with abortion of female fetuses, the promotion of partnership and mutual respect between men and women, and the need for reform of the international economic order.” (MARY ANN GLENDON, “What happened at Beijing”, in: *First Things* 59, January 1996: 30-36.)

⁴⁹ Paola Binetti

⁵⁰ Paola Binetti

In the final document, the language used to promote sexual rights was partially contained. However, the end result is far from satisfactory.⁵¹

Major issues such as dignity, male and female identity, sexuality as a language of personal love, pre-marital relationships and marriage, motherhood and fatherhood are absent in the Platform and post Beijing policies. Others such as parity, equal opportunities, overcoming poverty, maternal health, women heads of household, education ... etc. are present with an ideological bias⁵².

The Holy See Delegation decided to sign the document with various reservations that were presented to the General Assembly and were included, along with the reservations of many countries, in the final report.⁵³

⁵¹ “As at Cairo, the Holy See was concerned that language on sexual and reproductive ‘health’ would be used to promote the quick-fix approach to getting rid of poverty by getting rid of poor people. Much of the foundation money that swirled around the Beijing process was aimed at forging a link between development aid and programs that pressure women into abortion, sterilization, and use of risky contraceptive methods. That point has also troubled distinguished non-Catholic observers.” (MARY ANN GLENDON, cit.).

⁵² *Pilar Escudero de Jensen*

⁵³ “The Holy See’s position as the conference came to an end was thus a difficult one. The documents had been improved in some respects. But in other ways they were even more disappointing than the Cairo document, which the Holy See had been able to join only partially and with many formal reservations. [...] the Holy See delegation associated itself in part, with several reservations, with the conference documents. As at Cairo, it reaffirmed its well-known positions on abortion and family planning methods. It could not accept the health section at all. [...] In keeping with the Holy Father’s instruction to vigorously reject what was unacceptable, my concluding statement on behalf of the Holy See was sharply critical of the conference documents for the remaining deficiencies that our delegation had tried from the beginning to publicize and remedy.” (MARY ANN GLENDON, cit.)

“The Holy See wishes to associate itself with the consensus only on those above-mentioned aspects of the Documents that the Holy See consider to be positive and at the service of the real well-being of women... numerous points in the Documents are incompatible with what the Holy See and other countries deem favourable to the true advancement of women.” (“Holy See gives partial consent

Significantly, the *L'Osservatore Romano* correspondent in Beijing, in the final days of the conference, lamented the focus on battling the feminist ideologies held by dominant economic forces and the missed opportunity for real development and progress in the topics concerning the dignity of women.⁵⁴

2. *The outcome of the Beijing Conference*

Fifteen years on, the outcome cannot be described as completely positive. The 4th Conference succeeded in making a sharp analysis of the situation of women but many of the positive ideas proposed in documents, due to a lack of political will, remained as words written on paper.

... and instead the most negative part relating to gender and abortion has been spreading. Life and family received a severe blow in Beijing from a fiercely strong cultural minority and from a majority of women who are often unable to grasp the full disruptive force of those proposals, the use of those terms and the constant repetitive manipulation of the language⁵⁵.

While many financial and human resources have been directed towards the implementation of the "gender perspective" and "reproductive rights", other areas that were key to the true advancement of women have not been given the same importance.

to Beijing Documents”, in: *L'Osservatore Romano* Italian edition, 16 September 1995, p.1)

See the reference in note 4 for a complete list of reservations expressed by participating states.

⁵⁴ “Perhaps the Beijing Conference will be remembered as a great missed opportunity. The battle to stop the feminisms supported by the dominant economic forces prevented clearer agreements being made on the issues of the dignity of women, and also on the resources needed for their true development and progress which would doubtlessly be the same as those needed for the development and progress of society.” (CARLO DE LUCIA, “Conclusion of the Fourth World Conference on Women”, in: *L'Osservatore Romano* Italian edition, 16 September 1995, p.15)

⁵⁵ Paola Binetti

I see a disproportion in efforts [...]. Education, health, equal employment opportunities, protection of the family and motherhood are frequently mentioned, but in practice they are not priorities⁵⁶.

The creation of new international rights remains problematic,⁵⁷ as does the question regarding the authority by which it was done in Beijing. Issues remain unresolved regarding the cooperation of society with the challenges facing women today as they try to combine their full participation in public, social and economic life with their role in family life.⁵⁸ The ideology that has imbued the concept of gender equality has become more evident over the

⁵⁶ *Pilar Escudero de Jensen*

⁵⁷ “The Holy See has been following with great interest the commemoration of Beijing +10. We are pleased with the progress made in particular areas and are happy to support the great advances achieved by women and for women since Beijing. At the same time, we recognize there is much to be done and many new challenges on the horizon that threaten the progress made in favor of women and girls. The Holy See shares the concerns of other delegations about efforts to represent the outcome documents of Beijing and Beijing + 5 as creating new international rights. My Delegation concurs that there was no intent on the part of states to create such rights. Moreover, any attempt to do so would go beyond the scope of the authority of this Commission. With respect to the recently adopted declaration, the Holy See would have preferred a clearer statement emphasizing that the Beijing documents cannot be interpreted as creating new human rights, including a right to abortion.” (MARY ANN GLENDON, *Intervention at the 49th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women*, New York, 7 March 2005.)

⁵⁸ “The problem of harmonizing women's aspirations for fuller participation in social and economic life with their roles in family life is one that women themselves are fully capable of resolving. But the problem will not be resolved without certain major, one may even say radical, changes in society. In the first place, policy makers must attend more closely to women's own accounts of what is important to them, rather than to special interest groups that purport to speak for women but often do not have women's interests at heart. Secondly, care-giving, paid or unpaid, must receive the respect it deserves as one of the most important forms of human work. And thirdly, paid labor must be structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their security and advancement at the expense of the roles in which many millions of them find their deepest fulfillment. (*Laborem Exercens*, No.19.) In sum, the problem will not be solved until human values take precedence over economic values.” (MARY ANN GLENDON, cit.)

years and has resulted in limiting the true advancement of women. When the specificity and mutual complementarity between man and woman becomes dissolved, it does poor service to the cause of women.⁵⁹

Moreover, the question remains regarding the role of such meetings in the formation of the culture of our time, a place where minority views are gaining ground and legitimacy to the point of filling the moral and cultural void left by the crisis in Christian culture.⁶⁰ The question also arises in a society capable of an excellent examination of conscience but unable to produce concrete results to solve the problems that have been so brilliantly analysed. Is there not a risk of producing an opposite effect, by depriving words of all meaning when they do not produce the

⁵⁹ “Achieving equality between women and men in education, employment, legal protection and social and political rights is considered in the context of gender equality. Yet the evidence shows that the handling of this concept, as hinted at in the Cairo and Beijing Conferences, and subsequently developed in various international circles, is proving increasingly ideologically driven, and actually delays the true advancement of women. Moreover, in recent official documents there are interpretations of gender that dissolve every specificity and complementarity between men and women. These theories will not change the nature of things but certainly are already blurring and hindering any serious and timely advancement in the recognition of the inherent dignity and rights of women.” (Most Rev. CELESTINO MIGLIORE, *Address as Permanent Observer of the Holy See at 54th session of the Commission on the Status of Women regarding a 15 year review of the Beijing Conference*, <http://www.zenit.org/article-28578?l=english>, last accessed on 11 August 2010).

⁶⁰ “The most important political lesson to be taken from the Beijing conference is that huge international conferences are not suitable settings for addressing complex questions of social and economic justice or grave issues of human rights. Unfortunately, there is an increasing tendency for advocates of causes that have failed to win acceptance through ordinary democratic processes to resort to the international arena, far removed (they hope) from scrutiny and accountability. The sexual libertarians, old-line feminists, and coercive population controllers can be expected to keep on trying to insert their least popular ideas into UN documents for unveiling at home as ‘international norms’.” (MARY ANN GLENDON, *What happened at Beijing*, cit.)

desired effect, and by increasingly undermining confidence in political authority?⁶¹

Over the course of the past fifteen years, other events have entered the picture that have made it more complex. We will briefly mention some of them. In the year 2000, the 192 member states of the United Nations agreed on the Millennium Development Goals set to be achieved by 2015. These eight Goals are intended to ensure that further development reaches everyone. The third of these Goals is to “promote gender equality and empower women”.

The year 2010 saw the creation of a single agency under the United Nations for “gender equality and the empowerment of women”, which brought together the agencies that had previously dealt with these objectives. This agency was given the name UN Women and, in the words of Secretary General Ban Ki-moon “will give a strong impetus to UN efforts to promote gender equality, expand opportunities and combat discrimination in the world”.⁶²

⁶¹ *Giulia Paola di Nicola*

⁶² The following is an extract from the UN press release announcing the creation of the new agency: “*United Nations, New York, 2 July 2010* -- In an historic move, the United Nations General Assembly voted unanimously today to create a new entity to accelerate progress in meeting the needs of women and girls worldwide. The establishment of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women — to be known as UN Women — is a result of years of negotiations between UN Member States and advocacy by the global women’s movement. It is part of the UN reform agenda, bringing together resources and mandates for greater impact. ‘I am grateful to Member States for having taken this major step forward for the world’s women and girls,’ said Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in a statement welcoming the decision. ‘UN Women will significantly boost UN efforts to promote gender equality, expand opportunity, and tackle discrimination around the globe.’ UN Women merges and will build on the important work of four previously distinct parts of the UN system which focus exclusively on gender equality and women’s empowerment: Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW, established in 1946); International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW, established in 1976); Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI, established in

a. Remaining problems and emerging issues

In a culture of materialism, hedonism and consumerism, there are different forms of disrespect for the dignity of women. The systematic exploitation of their sexuality reduces it to a mere instrument of pleasure. The commercialisation of women's bodies and their treatment as objects is often presented to young women as an ideal to which they can attach their fragile dreams. When treated as sex objects, women experience a form of violence against their person. They are being reduced to becoming an object of another person's desires.

1997); United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, established in 1976). 'I commend the leadership and staff of DAW, INSTRAW, OSAGI and UNIFEM for their commitment to the cause of gender equality; I will count on their support as we enter a new era in the UN's work for women,' said Secretary-General Ban. 'I have made gender equality and the empowerment of women one of my top priorities — from working to end the scourge of violence against women, to appointing more women to senior positions, to efforts to reduce maternal mortality rates,' he noted. Over many decades, the UN has made significant progress in advancing gender equality, including through landmark agreements such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Gender equality is not only a basic human right, but its achievement has enormous socio-economic ramifications. Empowering women fuels thriving economies, spurring on productivity and growth. Yet gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched in every society. Women in all parts of the world suffer violence and discrimination, and are under-represented in decision-making processes. High rates of maternal mortality continue to be a cause for global shame. For many years, the UN has faced serious challenges in its efforts to promote gender equality globally, including inadequate funding and no single recognized driver to direct UN activities on gender equality issues [...] Secretary-General Ban will appoint an Under-Secretary-General to head the new body and is inviting suggestions from Member States and civil society partners. The Under-Secretary-General will be a member of all senior UN decision-making bodies and will report to the Secretary-General. The operations of UN Women will be funded from voluntary contributions, while the regular UN budget will support its normative work. At least US\$500 million — double the current combined budget of DAW, INSTRAW, OSAGI, and UNIFEM — has been recognised by Member States as the minimum investment needed for UN Women [...]'" (Press release United Nations, 2 July 2010, at <http://www.unwomen.org/2010/07/un-creates-new-structure-for-empowerment-of-women/> last accessed 11 December 2010).

Immigration often assumes the characteristics of a kind of modern-day slavery in which women pay the highest price. We can say the same about the case of television show girls [These young attractive women wearing provocative clothes appear as assistants in television shows]. All of this raises the threshold of sexual violence against women. It is almost as if a progressive loss of self control were taking place and, worse, there seems to be a growing intolerance to saying no and refusing to give in to sexual demands⁶³.

There has been no growth in the appreciation and support of motherhood at a social and cultural level. Indeed, very little value is placed on motherhood in our materialistic, hedonistic culture that is focused on success and the pursuit of pleasure. Added to this are attacks on marriage, and on the family which is founded on marriage. What can be done for women if there is no recognition or support for their role as mothers and educators who have a special calling to be custodians of life?

The problem of violence against women continues and at times intensifies or finds new expressions, as in some bad cases of domestic violence. It is also important to note that violence against women also takes place in cases of forced sterilisation, in the forced use of contraceptives, and when they are persuaded to have an abortion. This is particularly cruel when it is inflicted on poor and vulnerable women, and when it is not direct coercion but subtle manipulation that exploits vulnerability and encourages women to make individualistic choices that are against life.

Globalisation has had a negative impact on these issues. It has disseminated a standard of individualism that has brought about a drastic reduction – often by persuasion if not by enforcement – of the number of children per woman of childbearing age, even in developing countries⁶⁴.

The issue of “hidden agendas” in the Beijing UN conference continues and has increased dramatically in the last fifteen years.

⁶³ Paola Binetti

⁶⁴ Giulia Paola di Nicola

The agendas are no longer hidden, but have become visible and operative.

The Church is in a different situation now. Fifteen years ago we were taken by surprise and started discovering the depth and scope of the 'hidden agenda' of the post-Cold War UN conference process then unfolding. Nowhere in the world are we any longer in a 'pre-revolutionary' situation - nor even in a revolutionary situation: we are in a 'post-revolutionary' situation. This is perhaps clearer in the West than in the non-western world, where societal change is, however, extremely rapid. The Church historically played a critical role in uncovering the gender agenda and in discerning the secularist content of the new ethic. Yet information and education of the faithful remain a largely unaccomplished task within the Church, at the global level: there is still widespread ignorance about the content and process of globalization of the western cultural revolution, about its consequences and history. Yet it is helpful to grasp that the current global secularist ethic was not produced out of nothing, but is the fruit of a long historical process. History reveals that the 'gender ideology' is but one of the many manifestations of the new ethic, that it is not an isolated phenomenon, but a complex one related to a host of other anthropological, cultural and political dysfunctions and to the loss of faith in the world⁶⁵.

The prevalence of this “new global ethic”⁶⁶ is causing an unquestionable cultural revolution. It aims to replace the role of Christian ethics and to profoundly transform our concepts by not speaking in terms of women's vocation to motherhood, but of reproductive rights. It does not speak of the spousal identity of men and women but rather of the couple culture. There is no mention of vocation in the service of love but rather of empowerment. The concept of mutual male-female complementarity is replaced by the term “gender contract”. Rather than speak of spousal, maternal, filial and fraternal love, we hear of a culture of secular “citizenship”. The anthropological impoverishment that this change implies cannot be ignored.

⁶⁵ Marguerite Peeters

⁶⁶ Cf. M. A. PEETERS, *The new global ethic: challenges for the Church*, Institute for Intercultural Dialogue Dynamics, 2006.

Terms such as reproductive, sexual, social, economic and political 'rights' of women have been ideologically driven. Time has shown that they have hampered and delayed the real rights of women⁶⁷.

b. Women and men: the core anthropological question (“Gender ideology”)

From 1995 until today the growth and global dissemination of the “gender ideology” is evident. This ideology, which was widely present during the Beijing Conference,⁶⁸ was actually born around the 1950's in the context of the feminist movements and pro-homosexual activism and was developed at universities in the United States with the creation of “gender studies” in the 1970's.

Simone de Beauvoir's assertion is well known: ‘One is not born a woman, one becomes one’, often used to distinguish between biological sex and gender identity. We cannot forget that thoughts on these issues always carry a baggage of ancient injustices, wrongs never repaired and unfounded prejudices that have caused much suffering for many women in the name of a presumed male superiority. But these injustices, many of which are very real and well documented, have been subsequently exaggerated to justify and augment this sort of revolutionary rebellion⁶⁹.

It can be argued that since Beijing this ideology has entered a phase of globalisation. It is exerting an influence on the creation of new concepts and it is changing culture. After fifteen years it is evident that the phase of globalisation is almost complete as gender ideology has spread widely within laws and public institutions.

⁶⁷ *Pilar Escudero de Jensen*

⁶⁸ “A controversy over the word ‘gender’ that loomed before the conference had been largely defused with a consensus that gender was to be understood according to ordinary usage in the UN context. The Holy See, however, deemed it prudent to attach to its reservations a further, more nuanced, statement of interpretation, in which it dissociated itself from rigid biological determinism as well as from the notion that sexual identity is indefinitely malleable.” (MARY ANN GLENDON, cit.)

⁶⁹ *Paola Binetti*

During the sessions of the 4th Conference and in the final wording of their documents the term gender was used without ever defining what it meant. After some discussion and objections from several delegations, including that of the Holy See, it was clarified that the term should be understood in accordance with its ordinary use within the UN context. However, without an official definition, it has been left open to ambiguity, thereby allowing the term to be used according to a wide variety of anthropological views.

This was the most complicated point because the term took on a different connotation according to the anthropological vision of whoever was using it. Nor was it clear how to distinguish whether it was referring to a 'gender ideology' or to a social science approach, or to any other approaches for which it had previously been used⁷⁰.

Unfortunately, among international agencies in the last fifteen years an ideologically charged interpretation of the term 'gender' has prevailed. Perhaps it is appropriate to clarify that, in itself, the term gender is neutral. Its ideological charge can be explained as a reaction against a concept of sex that sees it as something purely physiological and genital. It is a reaction to the biological reductionism of sex.

The aim of avoiding biological reductionism is, in itself, an aim that we can all share. What has happened is that a kind of culturalism has prevailed that tries to detach sexuality from its essence as a fundamental anthropological factor of each person. This ideology has insinuated itself and gone hand in hand with a refusal to be identified by sex. This has led to sex being separated from gender, as if natural factors always and in every case hold personal freedom captive and stand in the way of cultural and historical development. Gender ideology, by reacting to ideological naturalism, asserts the complete independence of a person from his/her body. It spreads the belief that every individual can establish his/her sexual identity at will and declare it to the public authority. Gender as an ideology ends up transforming sexual orientation into a variable dependent on subjective taste, contexts or needs. Freedom becomes a vague

⁷⁰ *Pilar Escudero de Jensen*

aspiration towards objectives that are considered to be self-gratifying. On the one hand it is true that an anthropology that respects the person is dissociated from a kind of determinism according to which all roles and gender relations are established by a static model determined by nature. On the other hand, however, human beings are not only culture. No matter how hard we try, we cannot free ourselves from nature⁷¹.

This becomes an ideology when its response to biological reductionism causes it to fall into a form of culturalism that considers sexuality to be a mere matter of “choice” and “construction”. Absolute primacy is given to this, completely ignoring the facts of nature. As in any ideology, a partial truth is taken and turned into an absolute. It rejects identification with one's sex and even reaches the point of separating sex from gender. It is as if the facts of nature imprisoned personal freedom and went against the development of the individual. In an attempt to “liberate” sex from the facts of nature, which are regarded as being a form of oppression, sexuality ends up by becoming the fancy of choice, depriving it of its personal dimension, its dimension as a gift.

The absolute independence of a person from his/her own body, as claimed by gender ideology, is an illusion. While it is true to say that a person cannot be caged into a form of determinism that makes relations between the sexes and the roles of each one dependent on nature, it is also true to say that human beings are not pure culture. The facts of nature cannot be cancelled at the whim of the moment. Human beings – men and women – assume their individual identity by implementing a synthesis between nature and culture in their lives.

In fact, those who recognize ontological identity should not rule out the cultural identity acquired by human beings during the process of their primary inculturation, nor should they relinquish it once it is acquired. The recognition of ontological identity may, however, help to discern whether the acquired cultural identity helps to accomplish

⁷¹ *Giulia Paola di Nicola*

the innate purpose of ontological identity. In this sense, ontological identity calls for the contribution of a good cultural identity in order to be implemented properly⁷².

This is data that must be taken into consideration in order to approach the truth of the person. Identity is not something that is arbitrarily constructed. A good part of who we are is a gift, a gift that comes with the gift of life. It includes all those parts of ourselves that do not follow our own tastes or whims, but that must be received as a gift. It is in this way that they are to be given in loving relationships and in service to others.

Some of our experts noticed that the anthropological basis of gender ideology is very fragile as it is based on the changing and changeable nature of human desire. It is necessary for Christians to do more to present the richness of an anthropology that emphasises the unity of the human person: body, psyche and spirit.

There was some doubt as to whether or not the term “gender” ought to be used in the present context. Although the term is in itself neutral, it has become highly charged with ideology nowadays and using it can be confusing. However, other experts were in favour of its use as long as it is placed within the rich categories of Christian anthropology.

It is a fact that the term [gender] has gained ground in international and domestic spheres. There are budgets earmarked for such purposes, and training courses. It is a campaign that seeks to cross cover everything. If Catholics abide by the recommendation [to avoid using the term gender] they will leave the field open to radical feminists, who would eliminate the counter-balance achieved by the laity in many countries. If we refuse to use the term, radical groups will infiltrate with their own agenda faster⁷³.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to say that, as long as the word is given a meaning in accordance with Christian anthropology, discernment on its use will have to be done in each

⁷² *Marta Rodríguez*

⁷³ *María Eugenia Cárdenas*

case. Care must be taken not to cause confusion, and to keep the doors of dialogue open with people of goodwill who are concerned for the genuine welfare of men and women.