



## Economic and Social Council

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### **Substantive session of 2010**

New York, 28 June-22 July 2010

Item 2 (c) of the provisional agenda\*

**Annual ministerial review: implementing the internationally  
agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality  
and empowerment of women**

### **Statement submitted by Society of Catholic Social Scientists, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* E/2010/100.

## Statement

By establishing Goal 5 of the Millennium Development Goals, world leaders agreed that reducing maternal mortality was essential to fulfilling their “collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level”. Policy regarding Goal 5 should be based upon the latest and best data available.

A new study shows that United Nations agencies have been overestimating maternal mortality rates and pursuing policies based upon unreliable, unsubstantiated data. *The Lancet* reports that maternal deaths worldwide in 2008 totalled 342,900 rather than the 536,000 figure used by the World Bank, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in recent years.

A study by researchers at the University of Washington, which was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, finds that the numbers from WHO and UNICEF were faulty owing to a lack of proper reporting and imprecise statistical modelling. But the study by *The Lancet* also finds that progress has been made in preventing pregnant women from dying.

The study cites four main reasons for the improvement: declining pregnancy rates in some countries, higher per capita income, higher education rates for women and increasing availability of basic medical care, including “skilled birth attendants”.

The report finds that HIV/AIDS caused 60,000 maternal deaths and suggests that maternal deaths would have been significantly lower in Africa if mothers had been given antiretroviral drugs. This sharply contradicts current United Nations plans to divert funding from HIV/AIDS to family planning as a way to reduce maternal deaths.

The study shows that 50 per cent of maternal deaths come from just six countries, namely India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Researchers were surprised that three of the richest countries in the world, the United States of America, Canada and Norway, actually showed increased maternal mortality. These same three countries have the most liberal abortion laws in the world.

What was not cited anywhere in the document is abortion. Contrary to this study, the United Nations has promoted better maternal health through legal, or “safe”, abortion. The outcome of the 2007 Women Deliver conference, which was backed by UNICEF, WHO and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), was to declare that the best way to reduce maternal death was through family planning, including abortion. We now have even more evidence that this agenda is based upon unreliable, unsubstantiated data.

The new study uses the best statistical methods currently available and clearly demonstrates that it is not necessary to legalize abortion worldwide to bring about significant decreases in maternal mortality. We encourage States Members of the United Nations to continue to develop even better statistical information by

improving the identification of maternal mortality causality, especially induced abortion-related mortality, which is most often underreported or misreported.

The editor of *The Lancet* told the *New York Times* he had been pressured by “advocacy groups” to delay publication of the report until later in 2010, after United Nations meetings that discussed funding for maternal health had been held. Because of his courageous commitment to scholarly and scientific principles, we now have the evidence to pursue better policy.

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