



**29<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Human Rights Council**  
**Interactive dialogue with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health**  
**Joint Statement by VIVAT international, Franciscans International and MMM Sisters on the**  
**Issue of Obstetric Fistula**  
**Delivered by Susan Price**

Thank you Mr. President,

VIVAT International, Franciscans International, and MMM Sisters welcome the report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, particularly, the references made on reproductive health issues. Given that this session of the Human Rights Council features a number of important discussions on the universal rights of women we think it is important to raise the issue of maternal healthcare, specifically pertaining to obstetric fistula. This condition is caused by prolonged and obstructed childbirth and typically results in the loss of child and chronic incontinence if left untreated.

Improved maternity care has largely eliminated the issue in developed countries, but inadequate and inaccessible healthcare systems have prevented other countries from fully addressing this debilitating, but fully preventable condition. Fistula is estimated to affect roughly two million women, particularly in less developed areas of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The absence of systematic and appropriate prenatal and postpartum care contributes to its prevalence in these regions. In most communities doctors are inadequately trained to handle the relatively simple surgery, or else they lack access to the appropriate resources. Also of concern is the increasing occurrence of obstetric fistula as a result of rape in conflict situations.

Young women are at an increased risk, as their bodies are often not developed enough to give birth without medical support. Other serious possible side effects include infection, physical debilitation, and infertility. In most cases, family members and local communities ostracize these women, leaving them isolated and unable to reintegrate into society. Due to their physical condition and the stigmas associated with their situation, they often struggle to find work and have difficulty to pay for reparative surgeries.

We commend the proactive initiatives several UN bodies have taken to combat this issue. However, we believe that further measures can be taken to improve maternal healthcare systems, particularly in regions with significant rural populations, as is the case in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Awareness programs on the risks of early pregnancy and education about proactive prenatal care can greatly reduce the occurrence of this condition. Obstetric fistula is preventable and with increased global cooperation and targeted resource allocation, the international community can make significant steps towards eradicating it in the coming years.

Thank you.