

9 March 2004

Original: English

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## **Commission on the Status of Women**

### **Forty-eighth session**

1-12 March 2004

Agenda item 3 (c) (i)

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further action and initiatives: the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality**

## **Panel discussion on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality**

### **Summary submitted by the moderator**

1. At its 5th meeting, on 2 March 2004, the Commission on the Status of Women held a panel discussion followed by a dialogue on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. The panellists were: Robert Connell (Australia), Professor of Education at the University of Sydney; Jorge Lyra (Brazil), co-founder and Manager of the Institute PAPAI; Njoki Wainaina (Kenya), freelance consultant and co-founder of the Network of African Men against Gender-based Violence; and Bertil Lindblad, Deputy Director of the Office of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS in New York.

2. Participants agreed that men and boys had an important role in empowering women and achieving gender equality in the home, the community, the labour market and the workplace. Many men and boys were already supporting the promotion of gender equality and the advancement of women, and were agents of change for a more gender-equal society. However, both direct and indirect factors hindered men's involvement on a large scale. While direct obstacles included gender-biased legislation and policies, such as those that denied men the right to paternity leave and opportunities to care for other family members, indirect factors included gender stereotypes and negative attitudes and behaviour. It was therefore crucial to create an enabling environment with proactive public policy to facilitate the sharing of power and of responsibilities at the family and community levels. Broader institutional changes were also required to enable men's and women's

commitment to a new culture of gender equality. In such efforts, the diversity of men and boys should be taken into account.

3. Participants agreed that a gender-sensitive socialization process of both boys and girls from early childhood was critical to removing the persistent stereotypes and attitudes that continued to promote and perpetuate traditional roles of men and women. Such stereotypes often led to missed opportunities for women and men, sex-segregated labour markets, lack of economic and social well-being, a perception of female inferiority and lack of value attached to women's and girls' contributions. Participants recognized that both fathers and mothers played a vital role in challenging existing gender stereotypical attitudes and behaviour, which was a precondition for involving men and boys in achieving gender equality.

4. Participants emphasized the need to approach education in a holistic manner by incorporating gender issues into all education curricula beginning in early childhood. Both formal and informal education could play an important role in promoting an enabling environment for gender equality, particularly in disciplines where traditionally either men/boys or women/girls predominated by, for example, improving girls' access to technical education and training and boys' opportunities in nursing and teaching. The provision of alternative role models for young men and boys could assist in eliminating gender stereotypes and encourage men to seek employment in those professions. Participants emphasized that teachers had to be equipped to support gender equality and recommended that gender-awareness training be conducted and gender-sensitive education material provided. Teachers were encouraged to create an informal setting to sensitize boys and girls on gender issues.

5. Participants emphasized the need for greater gender awareness to equip men with gender-specific knowledge and skills and to mobilize a critical mass of men to serve as positive agents of change. Areas where such efforts were particularly necessary included the sharing of domestic responsibilities, sexual and reproductive health, fatherhood and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. It was important to create a space where women and men could dialogue on those issues. Education and awareness-raising campaigns that targeted men in male-dominated spaces, such as in the military, sports centres and athletic teams, as well as in schools and the media, had proved to be especially successful.

6. While emphasizing the crucial role of the family, peers and the education system in reducing gender stereotypes, participants underscored the strong influence of the mass media on value systems and the commitment to and perception of gender equality. The media should therefore be encouraged to portray women and girls, men and boys, in non-stereotypical roles. The media, the Internet and advertising could serve as powerful tools for conveying gender-sensitive messages.

7. It was highlighted that in most countries men's role in the family remained limited to that of financial provider. Participants emphasized men's important role as fathers and caregivers and encouraged men to be more involved in the care and support of family members. Through more responsible fatherhood, men could redefine the traditional concepts of masculinity in both the public and private spheres. Participants underscored that legislation and public policies needed to be more conducive to allowing both women and men to take on parental responsibilities and make use of provisions for part-time work.

8. Participants emphasized that gender inequality was one of the root causes of the spread of HIV/AIDS and contributed to women's and girls' increased vulnerability to the epidemic. Globally, there were more women and girls infected with HIV every year than men and boys. Many interventions on HIV/AIDS had failed to address the unequal power relations between men and women that often led to women's inability to protect themselves against the epidemic. While most of the attention so far had been on women's vulnerability, the role of men and boys in preventing the spread of HIV was increasingly acknowledged. There was a need to increase men's and boys' awareness of the consequences of irresponsible sexual behaviour.

9. Participants agreed that men and women had a shared responsibility to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Gender equality and greater responsibility for sexual and reproductive behaviour could be achieved by fostering partnerships between women and men. Men and boys could become agents of change in HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention, and care and support. The promotion of women's property and inheritance rights was likewise important. Women and girls were traditionally involved in home-based care and support of HIV/AIDS victims with the devastating result that girls dropped out of school. Men and boys could therefore play an important role in sharing this burden with women and girls.

10. Participants agreed that men should strengthen their efforts to stop violence against women, including trafficking in women and children for the purpose of sexual exploitation. To break the vicious cycle of men and boys perpetrating violence against and sexually exploiting women, more awareness-raising activities were required. Participants noted the negative effect of the preponderance of sexual abuse, violence and negative stereotypical images of women in the media, including the Internet, on young boys. Personnel serving in United Nations peacekeeping operations needed greater awareness about gender equality, specifically to prevent sexual exploitation, violence against women and trafficking in women and children in the framework of such operations.

11. The importance of partnerships between men and women for gender equality should be equally understood by men and boys, women and girls. It was critical to perceive gender equality not just as a woman's issue, but as a responsibility of society as a whole, and of both men and women. It was suggested that current patterns of gender inequality overwhelmingly privileged men through economic and political dividends. Therefore, national machineries for the advancement of women could promote strategies to enhance the involvement of men in gender equality work. This would allow men to put forward their perspectives and become full-fledged partners in gender-equal relationships. It was noted that men would have to relinquish some of the control, power and rewards that resulted from their dominant position in public and economic life, and that women would in turn need to give up some of their control and responsibilities in the household to achieve greater gender equality. It was also argued, however, that power was not a finite concept and would multiply when shared. The gains from greater gender equality included community benefits and personal benefits to men when the lives of girls and women as well as of men and boys improved.

12. Participants noted that a significant number of men were already agents of change, especially in eliminating violence against women and in combating HIV/AIDS. Convinced by the argument of justice for women, groups of men already

advocated for gender equality at the community level and at the level of individual families. At the community level, religious leaders, workers' groups, young men affected by HIV/AIDS, men working on human rights issues, parliamentarians, athletes and other male public figures had provided strong support for gender equality. At the family level, many men strove to construct "fair families" by sharing responsibilities and economic decision-making. The particular role of fathers in supporting girls' empowerment through education was emphasized. Strong commitment from men in key decision-making positions in support of gender equality was required for achieving broader organizational and institutional changes.

13. Concern was expressed that resources for initiatives to involve men and boys would be diverted from resources currently allocated to the advancement of women and girls. While the need to raise new funds for activities involving men and boys was also suggested, a more cost-effective approach would be to integrate the role of men and boys into all gender equality policies and strategies.

14. Participants emphasized that achieving gender equality required joint efforts at the national level by governments, parliaments, the private sector and other civil society actors, including religious leaders and the media, to develop national policies and programmes on gender equality that involved men and boys. Non-governmental organizations had been instrumental in bringing forward innovative ideas on involving men and boys in achieving gender equality. Men's own initiatives on awareness-raising about HIV/AIDS prevention and gender-based violence, including efforts made by men living with HIV/AIDS, were commended and could be used as good practice and replicated more widely.

15. Participants welcomed the opportunity to learn from the experiences of countries that had taken steps to involve men and boys in efforts to achieve gender equality. Examples of good practices were provided and ideas on necessary measures to involve men and boys were shared. Good practices included gender-awareness campaigns and interactive debates on violence against women, HIV/AIDS prevention, "fair play" at home and at the workplace, and the use of music television, films and messages through the Internet. Other successful strategies included formal educational curricula in primary schools that promoted gender equality; life-skill programmes in formal school settings; programmes that encouraged responsible motherhood and fatherhood; and performance management systems that took into account gender equality. Men's own initiatives in fighting violence against women and the spread of HIV/AIDS, such as the White Ribbon Campaign, were cited as successful examples for encouraging men and boys to take greater responsibility for their actions.