

52nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Informal panel

“The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS”

Wednesday, 27 February 2008, 1:00 – 3.00 p.m.

ISSUES PAPER

I. Introduction

In accordance with the methods of work of the Commission on the Status of Women (ECSOC resolution 2006/9), the Division for the Advancement of Women will organize a panel event in the margins of each annual session to enable a preliminary discussion on the priority theme of the subsequent session. During fifty-second session of the Commission (25 February to 7 March 2008), a panel discussion on “The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS” will be organized in preparation for the Commission’s session in 2009.

II. Background

The Beijing Declaration emphasized that equal sharing of responsibilities and a harmonious partnership between women and men were critical to their well-being and that of their families as well as to the consolidation of democracy (para. 15). In the Beijing Platform for Action the issue of unequal division of labour and responsibilities were addressed within the context of the critical areas of concern on Women and poverty¹, Education and training², Women and health³, Women and the economy⁴, and Women in power and decision-making⁵. It was noted that women bear a disproportionate burden, attempting to manage household consumption and production under conditions of increasing scarcity because of the gender division of labour and household responsibilities; girls and young women are expected to manage both educational and domestic responsibilities, often resulting in poor scholastic performance and early drop-out from the educational system; lack of access to productive resources and inadequate sharing of family responsibilities, combined with a lack of or insufficient services such as child care, continue to restrict employment, economic, professional and other opportunities and mobility for women; women’s unremunerated (unpaid) work is undervalued and under-recorded; and the unequal division of labour and responsibilities within households limits women's potential to find the time and develop the skills required for participation in decision-making in wider public forums.

The Platform notes that a more equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men not only provides a better quality of life for women and their daughters but also enhances their opportunities to shape and design public policy, practice and expenditure so that their interests may be recognized and addressed.⁶ The Platform called for the adoption of policies to ensure the appropriate protection of labour laws and social security benefits for part-time, temporary, seasonal and home-based workers; and the promotion of career development based on work conditions that harmonize work and family responsibilities (179 a). It also called on

Governments to ensure through legislation, incentives and/or encouragement, opportunities for women and men to take job-protected parental leave and to have parental benefits; promote the equal sharing of responsibilities for the family by men and women, including through appropriate legislation, incentives and/or encouragement, and also promote the facilitation of breast-feeding for working mothers (179 c).

It was emphasized in the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly that the changing context of gender relations, as well as the discussion on gender equality, has led to an increased reassessment of gender roles. This had further encouraged discussion of the roles and responsibilities of women and men working together towards gender equality and the need for changing those stereotypical and traditional roles that limit women's full potential.⁷ It also noted that there was a need for balanced participation between women and men in remunerated and unremunerated work. Failure to recognize and measure in quantitative terms unremunerated work of women, which is often not valued in national accounts, has meant that women's full contribution to social and economic development remains underestimated and undervalued. As long as there is insufficient sharing of tasks and responsibilities with men, the combination of remunerated work and caregiving will lead to the continued disproportionate burden for women in comparison to men.⁸ Governments were called on to design, implement and promote family friendly policies and services, including affordable, accessible and quality care services for children and other dependants, parental and other leave schemes and campaigns to sensitize public opinion and other relevant actors on equal sharing of employment and family responsibilities between women and men (paragraph 81 (d)).

Agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women have also addressed the issue of the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men. The 1996 agreed conclusions on child and dependant care, including sharing of work and family responsibilities highlighted that greater participation of men in family responsibilities, including domestic work and child and dependent care, would contribute to the welfare of children, women and men themselves (para. 5). The 2004 agreed conclusions on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality recognized that joint partnership between women and girls and men and boys was essential to achieving gender equality and called for the creation and improvement of training and education programmes to enhance awareness and knowledge among men and women on their roles as parents, legal guardians and caregivers and the importance of sharing family responsibilities.⁹

The Beijing Platform for Action recognized that the consequences of HIV/AIDS reach beyond women's health to their role as mothers and caregivers and their contribution to the economic support of their families. The social, developmental and health consequences of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases need to be seen from a gender perspective. (paragraph 98). Governments were called on to support and strengthen national capacity to create and improve gender-sensitive policies and programmes on HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, including the provision of resources and facilities to women who find themselves the principal caregivers or economic support for those infected with HIV/AIDS or affected by the pandemic, and the survivors, particularly children and older persons; (paragraph 108 (g)). The 2007 resolution of the Commission on the Status of Women on "Women, the girl child and HIV/AIDS", expressed concern that women and girls bear the disproportionate burden to care for and support those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS (51/1, paragraph 3) and encouraged Governments to increase the provision of resources and facilities to women who find themselves

having to provide care and/or economic support for those infected with HIV/AIDS or affected by the pandemic (51/1, paragraph 31).

The agreed conclusions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child adopted by the Commission in 2007 urged Governments to Identify and address the needs of girls heading households, including in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, for, inter alia, protection, access to financial resources, access to health care and support services, including affordable HIV/AIDS treatment, and for opportunities to continue their education, with particular attention to orphans and vulnerable children, and increase men's responsibility for home-based care in order to address the disproportionate burden borne by women and girls in caring for the chronically ill (paragraph 14.5 (e)).

III. Critical Issues

The persistence of cultural and social norms, traditional beliefs and stereotypes has been frequently identified as an obstacle to the achievement of gender equality.¹⁰ Traditional gender roles compel women and girls to assume the responsibilities for household. Domestic work is too narrowly defined as the work of women and girls, and not as a family responsibility to be shared among family members. Property ownership, labour patterns and hierarchies within households frequently afford more power and rights to men and boys than to women and girls.

Girls and young women undertake heavy domestic work at a very early age which often impacts negatively on their access to education and performance levels. Even in countries with high levels of participation of women in the workforce outside the home, and where the majority of girls attend school, traditional divisions of labour continue to give girls responsibilities for the care of younger children and other domestic tasks.¹¹ There is a growing international consensus on the need to engage boys and men in improving the well-being of women and girls and redressing discriminatory gender socialization.

The unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men limits women's participation in the labour market or increases their burden if they are employed. ILO (2007) reports that although there has been progress toward more even sharing of family responsibilities in some economically developed countries, such responsibilities are still very much assigned to women.¹² When women work, they are responsible for finding ways to balance child-raising with employment, which can be a major challenge for women in wage employment.¹³ The unequal division of labour and responsibilities within households also limits women's potential to find the time and develop the skills required for participation in decision-making in wider public forums. As a result, women are denied the possibility to influence development of policies and strategies, and the allocation of resources, in areas that directly affect their lives.

As a result of the general invisibility of women's unremunerated work in the national income accounting systems, there is an assumption, including among policy makers, that the supply of women's labour is unconstrained and flexible. It is presumed that women can adjust their time easily and rapidly between market work and household production. Provision of care is necessary to maintain families, but it has been stretched by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.¹⁴

The emergence of "family friendly" or "flexible" employment policies and practices marks the recognition by employers and governments of the importance of work/home relationships. Many

such policies have, however, paradoxically been mainly applied to women, thus maintaining the stereotype that the responsibility for caring lies solely with women. For example, in some countries parental leave is only available to women as "maternal leave". Such "family friendly" policies may actually reinforce the existing gender division of labour and responsibilities.¹⁵ Even in countries which have moved to parental leave for both women and men, and where considerable efforts have been made to encourage men to share family responsibilities with women, progress has been slow. For example, although men's role in caregiving has increased in many Nordic countries, women still take the vast majority of parental leave days and often reduce their working hours while their children are young.¹⁶

Responsibilities for care of people living with HIV/AIDS and for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS fall disproportionately on women.¹⁷ UNAIDS reports that millions of households are devastated by the epidemic, with the most significant impact on women and children.¹⁸ Girls drop out of school to care for sick parents or for younger siblings. Older women often take on the care of ailing adult children and later, when they die, care for the orphaned children. They are often also responsible for producing an income to support surviving family members. Older women caring for orphans and sick children may be isolated socially because of AIDS-related stigma and discrimination. The extra responsibilities for care and support taken on by women also have enormous implications for their own health and well-being.

IV. Format of the panel

The panel will take the form of an interactive dialogue. Five panellists will make presentations of no more than 7 minutes. Speakers intervening from the floor will be given 3 minutes to briefly share their experiences or address questions to the panelists. A summary of the discussion will feed into preparations for the priority theme of the fifty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2009. It will be made available on the DAW website.

V. Issues for consideration in the interactive dialogue

The following questions may serve as a non-exhaustive discussion guide:

- What are the **differences and inequalities between women and men in relation to unpaid work, including caregiving and domestic work**? What efforts have been taken to record the sharing of unpaid work, including through the use of time-use surveys? How can such surveys be used constructively to promote greater sharing of responsibilities?
- Have any efforts been made **to identify and address the negative consequences for women and girls of unequal sharing of responsibilities**, including on education, employment and participation in decision-making processes? Are there good practice examples of positive efforts at national level which can be shared?
- What initiatives are being undertaken at the national level **to change gender stereotypical attitudes and norms** that would, in turn, encourage equal sharing of domestic and caregiving responsibilities between women and men, boys and girls? What is the role of public policy in this regard? What initiatives can be taken within the education system or by the media? What other actors can be engaged to bring about change in gender roles and norms that perpetuate gender inequalities?

- What types of **policies and programmes, including family-friendly policies and programmes**, have been developed and effectively implemented **in the context of the labour market** to ensure equal sharing of domestic and caregiving responsibilities between women and men? Has there been any evaluation of family-friendly policies to ensure that the gender division of labour is not inadvertently reinforced?
- What innovations – for example in legislation, advocacy, policies, programmes and capacity-building, have been introduced in relation to **parental leave to ensure more active participation of men in caring roles**? What have been the impacts? What challenges remain in this area?
- What policies and programmes have been put in place to **increase access of both women and men to care support services** to allow them to access education and training and employment opportunities and participate in decision-making processes?
- What types of initiatives have been taken at national level to promote **equal sharing of caregiving between women and men in the context of HIV/AIDS**? What has been the impact of these efforts? What roles have men and boys played to share the responsibilities placed on women and girls to care for HIV/AIDS patients within the home?

¹ Beijing Platform for Action, paragraph 50

² Ibid, paragraph 71

³ Ibid, paragraph 89

⁴ Ibid, paragraph 164

⁵ Ibid, paragraph 185

⁶ Ibid, paragraph 185

⁷ General Assembly resolution S-23/3 on “Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action”, paragraph 47

⁸ Ibid, paragraph 47

⁹ Agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women on “The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality”, E/2004/11, paragraphs 3 and 6 9 (c)

¹⁰ United Nations. 2001. *From Beijing to Beijing+5: Review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action*, page 30,

¹¹ Report of the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child, September 2003 (EGM/Girl Child/2006/REPORT).

¹² International Labour Office. 2007. “Global Employment Trends for Women Brief”, March 2007, Geneva, page 10

¹³ Ibid. page 10.

¹⁴ Jessica Ogden, Simel Esim and Caren Grown. 2004. “Expanding the Care Continuum For HIV/AIDS: Bringing Carers into Focus”, *Horizons Report*. Washington, DC: Population Council and International Center for Research on Women.

¹⁵ R.W. Connell. 2003. “The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality”. Paper prepared for the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality, Brazilia, Brazil, October 2003.

¹⁶ Kimberly Morgan. 2007. “The Political Path to a Dual-Earner/Dual-Carer Society: Pitfalls and Possibilities”, George Washington University, Washington, DC.

¹⁷ UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM. 2004. “Caregiving” in *Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis*. New York.

¹⁸ UNAIDS. 2006. *Report on the global AIDS epidemic*. Geneva.