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Key policy initiatives on equal sharing of responsibilities
between women and men, including in the context of HIV/AIDS

Written statement*

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Equal Responsibility for Sharing and Care giving with an Emphasis on Men and Boys

This presentation is based on the report of the Expert Group Meeting on “The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS” organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women in October 2008 in Geneva.

One of the main ideas relating to men and boys to come out of the Report of the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) is the need for establishing a new social contract between men and women. Changing global economic conditions, new political configurations, sustained challenges to patriarchy worldwide, increasing empowerment of women, and new patterns of public discourse, have all combined to forge new alignments and social relations between men and women. A new social contract would suggest different terms and conditions of social intercourse. We must, in other words, find new ways of relating to each other. The old ways have outlived their usefulness. New challenges demand new patterns of behavior, new arrangements for living and social reproduction, and new ways of thinking about the sharing of responsibilities, and caring for each other and our family.

These ideas about change were long in the making. The Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development promoted the idea as early as 1994, for increasing the sharing of responsibilities between men and women. This position was followed up by the Beijing Declaration and the Beijing Platform of Action which even more clearly spelled out the problems of the unequal division of labor and how the burden of responsibility of women circumscribed their available options and restricted their public participation at the economic and political levels of society. Given women’s disproportionate burden of responsibility and caring, in conjunction with the fact that most of this work goes unrecognized, means that the true contribution of women to the society and economy is never properly assessed. In short, the marginal economic and social status of the contribution of women is undervalued and often under-appreciated.

In response to the calls for change in international fora, the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women organized an Expert Group Meeting in Brasília, Brazil in 2003, whose focus was to begin to find ways to incorporate the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. The 2004 agreed conclusion about involving men and boys in the process of promoting greater equality called for increasing the sensitivity of men and boys to these imbalances of responsibility and care provision, providing training programs to address this problem, and essentially recognizing that if social transformation is a desirable outcome, then it could only be realized with the cooperation and participation of men and boys. The current Report of the EGM is a continuation of these efforts at dismantling firmly established social norms of behavior of men and women, which have become encrusted in socially constructed layers of power, privilege and prestige. This arrangement then places the importance of the public sphere over that of the private sphere, the contribution of men and boys over that of women and girls, all of which undermines the real essence of democracy and the full benefits of citizenship for all. An important complement to this social arrangement is an elaborate ideological, legal, cultural and often religious rationale that is put in place to resist any and all changes to the status quo. The business of change therefore is a slow grinding one, filled with frustrations, but the benefit of waging the struggle is incalculable.

The Issue of Power

The EGM Report also draws attention to the underlying reason for this unequal sharing of responsibility between men and women, especially in the area of the provision of care, and more specially, in relation to people living with HIV/AIDS. The issue of power is not simply brought up in this Report because it is a fashionable practice to invoke it in such discourses. There is a certain amount of studied reflection in the Report about the way the asymmetry of power between men and women, explains the disparity concerning the assumption of responsibility for sharing and providing care. In most societies, men's earning power, their political and social status, along with cultural understandings about appropriate roles, give them a degree of autonomy that affords them leverage over which responsibilities to undertake, which to ignore, and which confirm or, in their opinions, undermine their roles as men. Though clearly not all men possess this material base of power, even in its absence, it is not unusual for men to behave as though they do, or to have some expectation of entitlement about what responsibilities they would assume, and which they think are not part of their charge but that of their wives or women and girls in their families.

Perhaps however, there is still more to address with respect to the issue of the asymmetry of power between men and women. Promoting equal sharing of power cannot be realized until we develop a new understanding of power; this means, establishing new modalities of power. We cannot expect to usher in a new dispensation of sharing of responsibilities without rethinking the ways we exercise and experience power in our social relationships in society. Within the current system, power for the most part, is exercised as an agent of domination and oppression. To realize any type of change of this practice, power has to be unhinged from domination and subjection, and placed in the service of liberation and transformation. The question then arises as to whether this latter understanding of power is possible within the context of global capitalism, as we understand it today; or if we have to envision some other kind of system that might be more compatible with such an objective. This then is a political question that can only be answered by reference to the specific social, economic and cultural context in which it is posed.

The importance of understanding power in this context however, not only has implications for equal sharing of responsibility between men and women, but very significantly, it also reveals how men interact with, express respect for, or dominate other men of different classes, races, religions and sexual orientations. The point to note here is that deconstructing the way power is organized and practiced, can also give us some insight into how men behave towards each other, which is an important part of the puzzle of the social relationships between men and women, and by extension between boys and girls, because the practice of the adults informs the future behavior of the youth of today. As the Report of the EGM concluded, in order to change the unequal sharing of responsibilities, it is necessary to challenge the foundation of patriarchal power at all levels.

Gender-based Violence

The issue of gender-based violence is a global concern in the present conjuncture. Everywhere there is an upsurge of violence in relation to the challenges of social life. Violence is endemic in modern society. One would be remiss however, if one were to single out a specific dimension of violence, without reference to its broader, and more complex trajectory. The EGM Report addressed this question directly. It argued that violence is one of the vexing consequences of the subordination of women and a source of the reproduction of inequality. Some of this violence is

related to the asymmetry of power that was mentioned earlier. Violence as a mechanism of control is not only a physical threat to women's security, but it also limits their options for realizing social progress. Violence then is anathema to the idea of equal sharing of responsibilities, and of the provision of care. There is a clear and understandable emphasis on the impact of violence on women in this Report, as in other reports and analyses. Women after all, are more likely than not, to be the victims of violent attacks.

What is often muted in many accounts about violence is the enormous amount of violence that transpires between men. It is not intended here to make simple comparisons about comparative victimhood. Rather, it is an attempt to create a broader understanding of the phenomenon of violence. If we are to break the cycle of violence as a mechanism of conflict resolution, we must work simultaneously to stop men from using violence to patrol the boundaries of women's sexuality for example, while intervening to stop men from maiming, assaulting and killing each other. Too much of this behavior has become normalized, so that we have almost become anesthetized by the increasing number of prisons that are being erected all over the world to warehouse men because of one form or another of the violence of their behavior. We need not detain ourselves here with any analysis of the prison industrial complex, which short of rehabilitating men, schools them in the ways of more sophisticated techniques of violence.

There are other forms of violence that should concern us as we tackle the notion of equal sharing of responsibilities and care giving. One such issue is the restriction of movement that is imposed on refugees and internally displaced individuals, and the suspension of their rights as human beings caught in situations of statelessness. This suffering is also a form of violence meted out on both men and women. People in some cases, trade the violence of repression and persecution at home, for the violence of the refugee camps. In this space, refugee women are even more vulnerable. Moreover, when in such contexts men undertake domestic roles not by choice but out of necessity, they feel dejected, and angry. Violence against women and children is not an uncommon response in such situations.

Violence therefore must also be seen structurally in terms of the deprivation of rights. We must name and challenge the limiting of options of women as a form of structural violence. The obstacles placed in the path of women that prevent them from participating in the political life of the country, that effectively restrict their access to decision making, and that circumscribe their involvement in public life, all constitute forms of violence. It is this totality of the concept of violence that should be borne in mind in terms of its impact on equal sharing of responsibility between men and women, and the provision of care.

HIV/AIDS and the Burden of Care

The EGM Report carefully examined the burden of care that falls on women and girls as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. There are over 33 million people in the world living with HIV/AIDS. The Report noted that in poor countries, there are about 10 million people who are in immediate need of treatment and care, while only approximately about 3 million are actually receiving such care. The problems in this area are many. Care assistance is affected by the fact that women are sometimes expected to have the permission or consent of their husbands in order to obtain care. Given the economic climate in some African countries, it is precisely in the area of the provision of care, that cutbacks are felt the hardest. As the report observed, the home is replacing the hospital as the primary place of care for people with HIV/AIDS.

It is not surprising that women and girls bear the brunt of the provision of care for people living with HIV/AIDS. The Report points to an estimate that suggests that women and girls provide 70 to 90 per cent of the care worldwide for people living with this disease. Older women are particularly affected by assuming the burden of care for HIV/AIDS patients, since they are forced to look after their adult children, many of whom would have returned home, at the same time that they are taking care of their grandchildren, whose parents are unable to look after them. In addition, the responsibility for providing care to orphaned grandchildren also falls on the shoulders of older women. What according to the Report, is up to now an invisible contribution is the burden of care undertaken by children. Children have become important sources of assistance to their grandparents in providing care to relatives living with HIV/AIDS. The Report cited a South African study, which noted that two thirds of those who provide care in this context are girls under the age of 18. This unequal burden cannot be allowed to continue. The provision of care has to be reconfigured away from the idea of a natural capacity of women for caring. Now more than ever before the crisis, HIV/AIDS poses demands on the sharing of responsibility and caring between men and women.

Having pointed to the unequal responsibility for caring with respect to HIV/AIDS, one must hasten to note that it does not mean that men are totally absent in providing some forms of care. There are some men and boys who are involved in providing care for people living with HIV/AIDS. Often, the contribution of men at this level is not recognized. The Report of the EGM however is careful to note that some men play an important role as secondary care providers to women who assume primary responsibility for care. They provide relief for the primary care providers, they contribute or sustain the household in which people living with the disease occupy, and in some cases, as single parents, they become the primary care givers. Unfortunately, stigma tends to undermine the delivery of care. Some men are less inclined to participate in providing care, when in so doing they are subject to the stigma of the disease themselves, or when mocked by both men and women for the roles they are undertaking. The public health efforts to educate people about this disease have to be redoubled, so that badly needed care is not jeopardized because of prejudice and inaccurate information.

A final comment about HIV/AIDS and the provision of care is in order here. As one commentator observed, the HIV/AIDS pandemic is a human rights crisis. If we recognize the human right to health, then by implication, the right to care is also included in that package of rights. The human cost to society of this disease is palpable. The economic, political, and demographic implications are also evident. Less clear are some of the more intangible dimensions of HIV/AIDS. There is an urgent need to begin to assess the ethical dimension of the disease. If the disease represents a human rights crisis, then the inadequacy the provision of care for the 10 million persons worldwide, mentioned earlier, who are living with the pandemic, amounts to a violation of their human rights. The need to have more men and boys share in the responsibility of providing care for persons living with HIV/AIDS is one that should become a priority for women's groups and feminists, for human rights advocates and public health officials, and should be central to the establishment of public policy. To move the phenomenon of care to occupy a space within the discourse of human rights increases its level of importance in much the same way that an economic accounting of the value of care work was so clearly articulated in this Report. In addressing many of these issues, the EGM Report would have made a significant contribution to placing the idea of equal sharing of responsibilities and of caregiving on the front burner of public policy where the matter cannot easily be ignored.

Economic Crisis and Equal Sharing and Caring

No one could possibly imagine that change of the magnitude suggested by the Report would be easy, but a new dimension has emerged to complicate the issue. It is the current economic crisis. As experience would have thought us, in a climate of fiscal austerity, matters related to welfare provisions are usually the first to go. Women tend to bear the brunt of all these adjustment measures. Though the Report makes a strong and compelling case for the need for government and employers to create family friendly policies, including generous maternity and paternity leave policies, flexible work arrangements and reduced working time, these are all recommendations that are contingent on more favorable economic conditions. We would be well served to be mindful of how easily the recommendations of the Report could be tabled as being too costly to implement at this time, or that they have to compete with other more immediate priorities of hunger or shelter. An awareness of the extent to which economic and political considerations could derail recommendations for ushering in a new social contract, means that the struggle for change has to be an unrelenting one. As we mark the adoption of the recommendations of this Report, we need to keep pushing forward on all fronts for changes of the current social arrangement.

One should not come away from the EGM Report thinking that men assume no responsibility for sharing of everyday tasks or for providing care; this would indeed be a falsehood. Men do more than undertake responsibilities that involve physical strength or out door chores. They assume responsibilities for the welfare and education of their deceased siblings' children, they look after ailing or aging parents, they work overtime or more than one job, or travel great distances to work in order to support their families economically, they provide stability in homes, and sometimes they assume sole responsibilities for the children and households when they take on the role of single parents. In other words, men are not projects that need fixing. What the Report seeks to do, is to suggest that men and boys need to be encouraged, not merely to participate more fully in this process of sharing and caring, but that the scope of their involvement should be expanded beyond traditional or accepted roles. Realizing this objective means cultural adjustment of both men and women to new forms of social interaction. Men and boys should begin to feel comfortable functioning in non-conventional roles, and women must provide the space for men to enter those areas, which they have long claimed as their domain. To this end therefore the Report recommends that strategies be developed for increasing the number of men involved in care giving professions, while being mindful of not doing so at the expense of women whose livelihoods are dependent on work in that sector of the economy. The Report also recommends designing training programs for men interested in entering these care professions.

Equal sharing of responsibility between men and women including caring giving in the context of HIV/AIDS, is a recommendation, which is long overdue. The burden borne by women and girls in this area cannot be allowed to continue. Not only does the EGM Report bring this issue to center stage but also it is guaranteed to generate a lot of discussion around the need for change at this time of increasing social, economic and political turmoil. Furthermore, this need for establishing a new social contract between men and women has at its foundation, a complex interplay of rethinking notions of social justice, reshaping democratic participation in society, and guaranteeing the right to the benefits of full citizenship for women and girls. Men and boys must begin to feel fully invested in this process of change. They must be made to understand how disparities between men and women in the assumption of responsibilities and the delivery of care, limit women's options, and violate their rights as human beings. The EGM Report then is an important policy document that should not only be read and discussed widely, but its recommendations should be studied and implemented appropriately.