

EGM/ESOR/2008/INF.1  
20 August 2008

ENGLISH only

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United Nations  
Division for the Advancement of Women  
Expert Group Meeting on “Equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS”  
United Nations Office at Geneva  
6-9 October, 2008

**AIDE MEMOIRE**

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## **I. Introduction**

1. In accordance with its multi-year programme of work for 2007-2009, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) will consider ‘The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/ AIDS’ as its priority theme during its fifty-third session from 2 to 13 March 2009. In order to contribute to a further understanding of the issue and to assist the Commission in its deliberations, the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) will convene an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on this topic from 6 – 9 October 2008 in Geneva, Switzerland.

## **II. Conceptual Framework for the Expert Group Meeting**

### **A. Background**

2. Commitments on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/ AIDS have been made by Governments at the international level, including at the International Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), the World Summit for Social Development (1995), and the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000), as well as in the outcomes of sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women since 1996. International human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), also recognize the obligations that State parties have to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men.
3. In 1994, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo<sup>1</sup> noted that the full participation and partnership of both women and men is required in productive and reproductive life, including shared responsibilities for the care and nurturing of children and maintenance of the household.<sup>2</sup>

4. The Cairo Programme of Action noted that male responsibilities should be emphasized with respect to child-rearing and housework and that greater investments should be made in appropriate measures to lessen the daily burden of domestic responsibilities, the greatest share of which falls on women.<sup>4</sup> Countries were urged to enact laws and to implement programmes and policies which will enable employees of both sexes to organize their family and work responsibilities through flexible work-hours, parental leave, day-care facilities, maternity leave, policies that enable working mothers to breast-feed their children, health insurance and other such measures. The Programme of Action recommended that similar rights should be ensured to those working in the informal sector.<sup>5</sup> The equal participation of women and men in all areas of family and household responsibilities, including family planning, child-rearing and housework, should be promoted and encouraged by Governments.<sup>6</sup>
  
5. Commitments made by countries at the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995, included the promotion of equal partnership between women and

7. The Platform noted 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.<sup>9</sup> The Platform called on Governments to ensure opportunities for women and men to take job-protected parental leave and to have parental benefits; to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities for the family by men and women, including through appropriate legislation, incentives and/or encouragement, and also to promote the facilitation of breast-feeding for working mothers.<sup>10</sup>
8. The outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly<sup>11</sup> also noted that 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

eliminating prejudices and practices which are based on the inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women. Under article 18 of the CRC, States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. ILO Convention No. 156 (1981) addresses the situation of Workers with Family Responsibilities.

11. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has implications for the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, particularly in the area of care-giving. The Beijing Platform for Action recognized the consequences of HIV/AIDS for women's role as mothers and caregivers and their contribution to the economic support of their families.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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<sup>17</sup> and encouraged Governments to increase the provision of resources and facilities to women who find themselves having to provide care and/or economic support

necessary resources to decision-making opportunities to carry out these responsibilities. Women in many societies assume the major tasks at the household level, which in turn, restricts their ability to participate in the workforce and the public sphere. The unpaid care-giving by women and men is very often based on relations of kinship and family, but also takes place through other relations and institutions, such as markets (e.g. domestic workers, nurses, preschool education teachers) and the voluntary/not-for-profit sector (e.g. home-based care networks).

14. The EGM will explore the causes of unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in the public and private spheres, such as gender roles, stereotypes and the socialization process, and identify the consequences of unequal sharing of responsibilities on the structure of the labour market, governance and decision-making at all levels. It will explore ways to address these consequences and propose policy responses to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in the public and private spheres.

### ***Gender stereotypes and unequal power relations***

15. Parental and societal expectations for girls and boys define socialization processes. Stereotypical gender roles perpetuate unequal power relations between women and men resulting in unequal access to rights and privileges and discrimination against women. In many societies, men exercise power and control over women, including their productive and reproductive work and their access to resources and decision-making.
16. The persistence of patriarchy and deep-rooted stereotypes has led to unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in both private and public life. Socially constructed gender roles are entrenched in social and cultural norms, institutionalized in the law, political structures and social and economic policies, and embedded in local and global economies. Discrimination against women is perpetuated in societies where women cannot exercise their rights. Gender roles take different manifestations in specific cultural, geographic and political settings. Violence against women is one serious consequence of systemic gender inequality and women's subordination.
17. The gender-based division of labour between women and men, including in relation to reproductive and productive roles, however, is not static. Changes in gender roles and responsibilities can be witnessed by the achievements in women's legal status, their access to the labour market and their greater political participation.

### ***The unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men at household level***

18. Stereotypes, lack of access to resources, unequal division of labour and hierarchies within households compel women and girls to assume a disproportionate share of responsibilities in the household, including cleaning, cooking, care of persons, including the young, elderly and the sick. In many developing countries, this also includes collecting water and firewood, food crop production and raising livestock.

19. Women's unequal control in reproductive decision-making regarding the number, timing and spacing of children exacerbates their domestic and care-giving tasks, and continues to negatively affect their health and restrict their access to education, employment and their ability to participate in other areas. Women do not have equal decision-making power regarding the use of household and community resources, including financial resources. The absence of affordable and accessible care facilities combined with the pervasiveness of gender wage gaps create structures where men take on paid work while women are seen as responsible for unpaid care-giving work. The presence of children increases men's allocation to paid work and women's allocation to unpaid care work. As

involvement, where men are presumed to be the “breadwinners” and it is assumed that women will take the prime or sole responsibility for activities at the household level. As a consequence, in many parts of the world, insufficient provision of social services, such as child and elder care, continue to restrict employment, limit economic, professional and other opportunities, and constrain mobility for women.

24. The unequal division of labour and responsibilities within households also limits women's potential to find time and develop skills required for participation in wider public forums and governance processes. As a result, women have limited opportunity to influence the development of policies and strategies, the allocation of resources and the provision of services, in areas that directly affect their lives. When women organize and participate in local and national governance structures, including at decision-making level, their voice and influence in policy development can have a direct impact on their lives, including, for example, through access to adequate and affordable public transport, and improved availability and location of health facilities and schools.

#### ***Equal sharing of care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS***

25. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has further compounded the regular care-giving responsibilities of women and girls as responsibilities for care of people (women and men) living with HIV/AIDS and for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS fall disproportionately on them.<sup>21</sup> Profound effects are felt across generations, and 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. 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, and for the communities in which they reside. The cost of medication and treatment impacts household resources and the ability to cover other needs, such as the education of girls. Men often play an insufficient role in caring and providing support for those infected by HIV/AIDS.

#### ***Legislative and policy responses to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in all areas***

26. Since women’s unpaid care work is one of the most persistent barriers to gender equality, governments have a responsibility to address this issue in all policy initiatives. A range of public initiatives designed to increase equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in public and private life have been adopted in countries around the world. These include adopting and implementing gender-sensitive labour laws; family-friendly or flexible employment policies; providing public services (such as child care and elder care institutions) and developing systems of financial support such as allowances and pensions. Many such policies have, however, been directly targeted at women, thus potentially reinforcing the unequal sharing of responsibilities and care work. Even in countries which provide parental leave for both women and men, and where considerable

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<sup>21</sup> UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM. 2004. “Caregiving” in *Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis*. New York.



efforts have been made to encourage men to share family responsibilities with women, progress has been slow. Broader public policy interventions have been undertaken to support men's and women's equal roles and responsibilities in the public and private spheres, including those designed to improve social infrastructure, such as the availability of education and health institutions, and physical infrastructure projects to reduce time burdens, public transportation and access to energy sources and water. Awareness-raising campaigns and education programmes as well as anti-discrimination legislation are also essential for the eradication of discriminatory stereotypes and ensuring the equal distribution of responsibilities between women and men.

### **III. Objectives of the Expert Group Meeting**

27. The overall objective of the EGM is to facilitate an exchange between experts on strategies for the promotion of the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men. Experiences gained, lessons learned and good practices will be highlighted and concrete recommendations developed. The outcome of the EGM will assist the 53<sup>rd</sup> session of Commission on the Status of Women in formulating policy recommendations on equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including in the context of HIV/ AIDS.

28. The meeting will:

- identify the causes and consequences of the unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men; and
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32. The EGM will be organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in Geneva from 6-9 October 2008.
33. The EGM will be conducted in English and all documentation will be in English. The EGM will meet in plenary and in working groups. In an opening plenary meeting, presentations by the experts will create a conceptual framework for discussions. The plenary will be followed by in-depth discussion of specific issues in working groups and drafting of the report.

## **VII. Expected Outcome**

34. The report of the EGM will be adopted by the experts on the final day of the meeting and will contain a summary of the discussion and recommendations. The report will be distributed at the 53<sup>rd</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women and will be made available on the website of the Division for the Advancement of Women. The findings will also be presented at the interactive expert panel during the 53<sup>rd</sup> session of the Commission.

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