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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third 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 critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS

Statement submitted by Zonta International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2009/1.



Statement*

Zonta International is a worldwide organization of professional executives committed to improving the legal, political, economic, educational, health and professional status of women and girls through service and advocacy. Zonta International is also dedicated to promoting justice and universal respect for fundamental freedoms. In furthering these fore-mentioned goals, Zonta International is keenly interested in the discussions and recommendations for the priority theme of this year's Commission on the Status of Women as well as the assessment of progress made in the implementation of the review theme, "Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels."

Discrimination against women and girls is a social construction, often perpetuated in families, communities, religious practices, economic structures and government policies, the underlying tenet of which is often that women should be confined to their traditional roles in society and women are inferior to men. Men, therefore, are entitled to assume the power to control the lives of women.

Violence against women, also deeply rooted in such gender beliefs and roles, reinforces male dominance over women and not only works against equal sharing of responsibilities in the family, but restricts women's abilities to participate in the wider sphere of remunerative labour or community activities.

In family and private life, these attitudes and behaviors result in women and girls performing a much greater share of caregiving for children, the sick and the elderly and also performing most of the unpaid work. As a result, girls may not attend school, women may not have the time or resources to acquire skills to better their lives or to participate in community decision-making. This reinforces gender inequalities as women have little opportunity to develop financial autonomy and men dominate public life.

The pandemic of HIV/AIDS has exacerbated the burdens of caregiving for women of all ages who perform an estimated 90% of the care need generated by the illness. HIV/AIDS has also dramatically increased violence against women and girls as shown by the sharp rise in percentages of women, especially young women, who have contracted the disease. The increased demands of caregiving for HIV/AIDS patients, which is primarily done at home, has devastating financial implications for families, when neither the sick nor the caregiver can work. Evidence indicates that girls are twice as likely as boys to be kept out of school to care for sick relatives or to work to contribute to household incomes. It has also fractured the traditional family structure with many children losing one or both parents, grandmothers becoming parents again, and orphan children becoming heads of the household.

Zonta International through its international service projects has addressed some of these important issues for women's rights and gender equality in the context of the priority theme:

* Issued without formal editing.

- From 2000-2004, Zonta International partnered with UNIFEM in a project called “Reinventing India”. This multi-faceted approach to violence prevention focused on raising awareness of the potential role of men in preventing violence against women, and included a nationwide film and television publicity campaign presenting of positive role models for men and boys.
- From 2006-2008, Zonta International partnered with Care International in a micro-credit and health education project for HIV/AIDS infected women in Niger. The project centered on the establishment of all-female savings and loans groups, which allowed women to create small businesses and have resources of their own. The groups also provided women HIV/AIDS education, self esteem and negotiations skills training and provided support networks of their peers.

Women’s predominant role in unpaid work and in caregiving in the private sector, enables a set of arrangements in how work is organized, occupational hierarchies, salary scales and social and labour policies that make the assumption that a worker’s major concern is employment. A lack of attention to family-related responsibilities in the paradigm of labour, has had direct consequences for women lower rates of female participation in the paid labour market, and women being relegated to less responsible jobs and female-male wage gaps.

Because caregiving and unpaid labour are undervalued or unvalued in national economic statistics and because women are by and large not central to the planning, implementation or evaluation of national or local budgetary considerations, women receive little support in public policy for caregiving, paid or unpaid. In most parts of the world there is insufficient provision of social services such as child care or elder care, and that continues to restrict women’s employment opportunities as well as their full participation in all aspects of life.

It must be noted that in both developed and developing countries, paid care services have become an increasing sector of the economy and one that is also highly gender specific. Paid care is, unfortunately, susceptible to the competitive pressures that can foster low pay and low quality services, which adversely affect both care recipients and caregivers.

How societies and the individual states respond to the complex challenges of caregiving and the equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women necessitates action in many arenas.

The preamble to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states “that a change in the traditional role of men as well as women in society and the family is needed to achieve full equality between men and women.” In moving toward this goal it is critical to engage men and boys as champions of gender equality and women’s rights. This must be done by creating a dynamic enabling environment for individual achievement and mutual respect, beginning with the family and moving through the whole of society. Education must focus on equal worth and opportunity for men and boys, women and girls. In particular, since it is customary in many societies that males are given the superior position, it is essential for men and boys to believe in the benefits of gender equality in their own lives.

Zonta International supports the full implementation by each signatory country of the commitments made to the CEDAW Convention as a framework for establishing substantive equality between women and men in both private and public spheres.

In the context of this year's priority theme, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Count women's unpaid care work so as to make visible the inequalities of caregiving; and make unpaid care a critical part of national budgetary and planning processes
- Prioritize measures such as social infrastructure, including available health and educational services and infrastructure projects that reduce the time burden of women, such as public transportation and access to water and energy resources so women have opportunities to fully participate in all aspects of life
- Pay attention to the rights and development of girls as equal partners in the future of all nations
- Engage men and boys in eradicating gender-based violence and sexual discrimination to promote human rights and equal sharing of responsibilities as a benefit for all
- Home care issues should be a central part of the response of Governments to the HIV/AIDS epidemic
- Build the capacity and political will to expand women's participation in decision-making at all levels so that policies include the experience and priorities of women's lives.

Legislative and policy initiatives, the allocation of resources by Governments and from other resources, the engagement of both men and women and, in particular, the empowerment of women are all necessary to move forward toward the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men.
