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INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

**Review Theme: Equal sharing of responsibilities between
women and men, including caregiving in the context of
HIV/AIDS**

**Panel 4: Gender norms and stereotypes, socialization and
unequal power relations**
Sharing and balancing life-work responsibilities

PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN WOMEN CAREGIVING ROLE

by

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¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Madam Chair, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

It is an honour and pleasure for me to also participate in this panel which is dedicated to the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men especially with regard to sharing and balancing work, private and family life. As was already mentioned I am working as the head of Gender Equality Unit of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Our Unit is responsible for creation and coordination of government policies in the area of equal opportunities for women and men.

Inseparable part of the policies concerning equal opportunities for women and men is also searching for possibilities of better balancing of work, private and family life. Focusing on this topic is also crucial for many other areas such as increasing of number of women in decision-making positions, strengthening economic independence of women or combating violence against women.

There have been some positive changes towards the improvement of the situation of women in the Czech Republic since 2009 when the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men (including care giving in the context of HIV/AIDS) was a priority theme of the Commission on the Status of Women. I would like to mention one important legislative change. It is the adoption of the Antidiscrimination Act which took effect in 2009. The Antidiscrimination Act is a general legal norm prohibiting discrimination on specific discriminatory grounds, notably on the grounds of gender. Antidiscrimination Act is related especially to the area of employment, entrepreneurship or social security. These areas are very closely linked to solutions for balancing work, private and family life.

The Government Council for Equal Opportunities of Women and Men established as an advisory body in 2001 is an important institution which is specifically engaged in gender equality issues. In connection with the theme of this panel – sharing and balancing life-work responsibilities – it is important to mention that a committee of the Council called Committee for Balancing Work, Private and Family life was established in 2009. This Committee is entitled to submit relevant proposals, recommendations or initiatives to the Council. Two most important issues the Committee is dealing with are child-care services for children in pre-school age and flexible working arrangements. The Committee considers these areas as the most important for appropriate balancing of work, private and family life.

The Committee consists of representatives of public administration, employers' associations, trade unions and non-governmental organizations. We consider membership

of the representatives of non-governmental organizations as fundamental because their insight into the topic of balancing of work and private life and their know-how is essential for work of such advisory body of the Government. This link between non-governmental organizations and government policies could be mutually beneficial. Through the Committee, representatives of non-governmental organizations offer their experience and can therefore influence Government's policies in the area of equal opportunities of women and men.

The Committee for Balancing Work, Private and Family Life is chaired by a representative of a non-governmental organization, currently Network of Mother Centers. Let me say few sentences about this Network. Mother Centers are usually established and managed by mothers on parental leave. They enable mothers with small children to get out of the isolation they may face because of all-day care of children.

The first Mother Center in the Czech Republic was established in 1992 and, ten years later, the Network of Mother Centers was founded. The Network brings together more than 300 Mother Centers from all over the country. Within the Network mothers (and also fathers and grandparents) are able to strengthen their self-confidence and become active citizens. Through common actions, they can also influence social development and political decisions. The Network of Mother Centers offers children day-care which is particularly important as there is a relatively low capacity of child-care services for children in pre-school age in the Czech Republic. Furthermore, the Network of Mother Centers makes effort to build the so-called caring community which provides sense of solidarity and is open for all social classes, races, refugees and many others. Such community is able to teach tolerance and prevent xenophobia. The Network of Mother Centers focuses on different target groups, including employers and employees. The Network is a member of several international organizations such as GROOTS International (since 1999), has a partnership with the Huairou Commission and also initiated the establishment of the international network of Mother centers MINE in 2001.

In 2012, the Working Group Men and Gender Equality of the Government Council for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men was established. Among other topics, the Working Group is engaged in the issue of men and care giving. By means of the Working Group the Czech Government also cooperates with non-governmental organizations. The Working Group is chaired by the director of a non-governmental organization the League of Open Men which is among others focusing on the support for the care giving role of

men. From their initiative, in 2010 and 2011 the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs implemented a project called How To Dad.

The main objective of How To Dad project was to increase the number of men actively involved in parenthood, thus enabling women to engage in professional life. The project also aimed on promoting the value of fatherhood while at the same time fighting the discrimination of women on the labour market. The project showed parenthood as a responsibility shared by both the woman and the man and provided tools for increasing the men's participation in parenting. It was also deeply focused on balancing work and family life. Basic activities of the project included qualitative and quantitative surveys, media campaign or conferences of experts.

A campaign focused on all categories of fathers, i.e. married, single or divorced, biological or adoptive, experienced or beginners, who care for their children, was the most visible project outcome. Most fathers are serious about their fatherhood but sometimes lack practical information. While the project helped increase their parental knowledge and skills, it also made them realize what they personally gain from fatherhood. It further represented a counterbalance to the negative images of fatherhood and fathers occurring in the society and the media today. Finally, the project encouraged companies and government agencies to spend more time thinking about fathers, to offer them benefits, and to integrate active fatherhood into their human resource policies.

Using this project as an example, I would like to emphasize that shared care between men and women is crucial for women's role in the society and for their possibility to participate in public life, hold decision-making positions and increase their economic independence.

Let me add that in the Czech Republic, some specific conditions still prevail, negatively affecting the possibility to share care giving role between women and men. For example the parental leave usually takes three years— one of the longest parental leaves in the European region. Indeed, parental leave, including the entitlement to parental social benefits, is crucial for the full development of the care giving role. On the other hand, long-lasting parental leave may have some negative impacts on the equality of women and men. In the overwhelming majority, it is the women who are on parental leave which has an adverse effect on their labour market status. It is therefore necessary to adequately reconsider the parameters of maternal and parental leave so that its positive impacts clearly prevail over the negative ones.

As previously mentioned, one of the challenges in the Czech Republic is the relatively low capacity of child-care services for children of pre-school age. In the past, there had been quite a high number of these facilities but due to demographic changes in the Czech society their capacity was reduced. However, these days again the demand is not met, and the Government of the Czech Republic had to solve the situation and to make the system of child-care services adequately flexible to the demographic changes.

One of the measures aimed at increasing the number of child-care facilities for children of pre-school age in the Czech Republic is the draft Bill on Child Group. This law will establish a so-called child group as an alternative child-care facility to crèches or kindergartens. Child groups will provide care for children from six months of age until the beginning of their compulsory education. This child-care service will be provided on a non-commercial basis. For now, parents may make use of kindergartens managed by local administrations and partially publicly funded, or use the commercial facilities that are, however, accessible only to higher-income families.

The child group should be primarily established and operated by employers for the use of their employees. It will also be possible to establish a child group by public administration entity (municipality, region or state) as well as non-governmental organization. The draft Bill on Child Group foresees easier establishment of the child group than the establishment of a kindergarten, as it will be subject to some less strict standards (no need to register within Register of Schools etc.). An integral part of the Bill on Child Group is the possibility of tax deduction for employers who establish a child group for their employees. It is an important motivation for the employers and it will also promote corporate social responsibility, strengthen solidarity within the company as well as the mutual link between employers and their employees. On the employees' side this should result in higher loyalty and positive working environment. The Bill further includes a tax deduction for parents who will be able to reenter the labour market thanks to the use of the child group services. This is another factor of positive motivation which may contribute to broader use of the child group.

In general, we are also expecting that the growing variety of options of child-care services will positively influence the return and position of women on the labour market after parental leave.

With the help of a pilot project launched within the preparation of the Bill on Child Group, in 2011, we established a child group at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. This

model child group was intended to set parameters contained in the Bill. The service has been warmly welcomed by the employees and has gradually found its place within the organization. Following the positive response, we have recently enlarged the capacity of this child group. It also serves as a source of inspiration for other public administration authorities as well as private employers.

Madam Chair, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

Care giving role of men and women is an important part of the lives of both of them and it deserves protection and support. The fact remains that at present, care giving role is mostly taken up by women regardless of whether it is care for children or other persons such as the elderly. This role is, however, not appreciated enough. I think that an integral part of the protection of the care giving role is the necessity to balance work life with activities in private and family life in which the care giving is mostly done.

Instruments for balancing work, private and family life are very important. Thanks to them women are able to develop their caregivers' role and at the same time pursue their needs and ambitions in the field of public life, employment, politics or decision-making. Had these been implemented, women would not be forced to choose between care and employment and would be able to participate in both activities according to their needs and preferences.

In this regard it is also important to involve men in the implementation of measures which support and promote the care giving role and create conditions in the society for exercising this role. It also contributes to overcoming gender stereotypes connected to the traditional understanding of women as caregivers and traditional understanding of men as breadwinners.

As another crucial element, I would like to emphasize the cooperation of state administration with non-governmental organizations based on openness and good will of both sides.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic is taking steps to better balance work, private and family life and to overcome gender stereotypes. Through these means, the care giving role of both women and men would be adequately supported. I am convinced that the recent achievements aim in the right direction and will be a solid foundation for further steps in the future.