

Opening statement

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Expert Group Meeting on
“The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men,
including care-giving in the context of HIV/ AIDS”

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Distinguished hosts, experts and observers,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this Expert Group Meeting on “The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/ AIDS.” I would like to thank the experts for accepting the invitation of the United Nations Secretary-General to share your expertise on this important topic. I also welcome all other participants who are attending as observers from Government, the United Nations system, and non-governmental organizations.

I would like to express my gratitude to our partners for this event, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). I am especially grateful to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe for hosting this meeting, in particular to Ewa Zimny for her personal commitment and support.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women plays an important catalytic role as the primary inter-governmental body in advancing the global policy agenda on gender equality and the empowerment of women. The Commission focuses on one priority theme at each annual session, and adopts policy recommendations in the form of agreed conclusions. The agreed conclusions are widely disseminated to governments, the United Nations system, NGOs and other stakeholders.

At its 53rd session from 2 to 13 March 2009, the Commission will address the priority theme of “The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS.” This is not the first time the Commission has addressed the sharing of responsibilities as a priority theme. In 1996, one year after the Fourth World Conference in Beijing, the Commission considered the theme of child and dependent care, including sharing of work and family responsibilities, and adopted policy recommendations. (These recommendations will be shared with you.) These recommendations were of course adopted in a different context. Since then, there has been considerable work done on the role of men and boys in promoting gender equality and the HIV/AIDS pandemic has changed the discourse on care-giving.

Nonetheless, these recommendations from 1996 provide an important framework for our discussions today.

Prior to each of the annual sessions of the Commission, the Division for the Advancement of Women holds an expert group meeting to ensure access to the latest research and practical experience on the priority theme. This meeting of experts provides a critical opportunity to impact on the Commission's deliberations and the development of the policy recommendations.

In preparation for the Commission, the Division for the Advancement of Women also organizes an on-line discussion to allow women and men who will not be able to participate in the Commission to make a contribution to the discussions and outcomes. From 7 July-1 August 2008, the Division organized an online discussion "Women and men: Equal sharing of responsibilities". A total of 1,243 participants registered for the discussion, the majority of whom were women from Africa, Asia and the Pacific. During the discussion, 340 messages were posted. The report from the on-line discussion is available at this meeting and the Moderator of the discussion will also briefly present an overview of some of the findings later this morning.

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Governments have made a number of international commitments on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men on a variety of issues relevant to the theme of the Commission. These are outlined in the Aide Memoire and in a separate document. I will therefore not go into detail here but will list the most important policy contexts in which this issue has been raised.

The *Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development* (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 noted, for example, 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 the maintenance of the household. The Cairo Programme of Action emphasized male responsibilities with respect to child-rearing and housework. It called for greater investments to lessen the daily burden of domestic responsibilities which falls on women. [Countries were urged to enact laws and to implement policies and programmes which will enable all employees – women and men - to organize their family and work responsibilities through flexible work-hours, parental leave, including maternity leave, policies that enable working mothers to breast-feed their children, day-care facilities, health insurance and other measures.]

The 1995 *Beijing Declaration* emphasized that the equal sharing of responsibilities and a harmonious partnership between women and men were critical to their well-being and that of their families, - and importantly - the consolidation of democracy. The *Beijing Platform for Action* noted that women bear a disproportionate burden of labour and household responsibilities. The Platform noted, among other things, the importance of the unequal sharing of responsibilities for education, health,

participation in decision-making and for the empowerment of girls. [Girls and young women are expected to manage both educational and domestic responsibilities, often resulting in early drop-out from the educational system. Lack of access to productive resources and inadequate sharing of family responsibilities, combined with lack of or insufficient services such as child care, continue to restrict women's employment, economic, professional and other opportunities and their mobility, as well as women's potential to find the time and develop the skills required for participation in decision-making in wider public forums.]

The fact that the HIV/AIDS pandemic has implications for the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, particularly in the area of care-giving, has also been recognized in the intergovernmental processes. The Beijing Platform for Action recognized the consequences of HIV/AIDS for women's role as mothers and caregivers and for their contribution to the economic support of their families.

The 1996 agreed conclusions adopted by the Commission on child and dependent care, including sharing of work and family responsibilities, already mentioned earlier, highlighted, among other things, that greater participation of men in family responsibilities, including domestic work and child and dependent care, would contribute to the welfare of children, and of women and men themselves.

Five years after the Beijing Conference, the outcome document of the five-year review of progress in implementation of the Platform for Action at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly in 2000 also noted the failure to recognize and measure in quantitative terms the unremunerated work of women. The fact that this work is often not valued in national accounts means that women's full contribution to social and economic development remains underestimated and undervalued.

Agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women on other priority themes since 1996 have raised the issue of the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men. These include the 2004 agreed conclusions on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality which recognized that partnership between women and men 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.

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 protection, access to financial resources, and access to health care and support services, including affordable HIV/AIDS treatment. Measures should be taken to 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.

The 2007 resolution of the Commission on the Status of Women on women, the girl child and HIV/AIDS 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.¹ The resolution called on Governments to utilize funds earmarked for care and support to reduce women's disproportionate burden of care and promote a more balanced sharing of the provision of care by both men and women.

In addition to these intergovernmental mandates, a number of international Conventions also call on State parties to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men. Article 5 (a) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women notes the need for appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to 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 Convention on the Rights of the Child, 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. Furthermore, the Convention highlights the responsibility of the state by calling on States parties to support parents and legal guardians in their child-rearing responsibilities to "ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children."

The International Labour Organization Convention No. 156 (1981) , and its corresponding resolution, specifically addresses the situation of Workers with Family Responsibilities, as outlined in the excellent background paper provided by the ILO.

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This is an impressive list of mandates and recommendations on the topic before us today. However, as the experts, co-sponsors and observers, have made clear through the papers submitted to this Expert Group Meeting, there is need for further development of policy at global level and a significant need for increased domestication of global policies and enhanced efforts to ensure full implementation at national level. The Commission on the Status of Women has recognized as one of its greatest challenges the need to address the gap between policies and practical outcomes at national level. This Expert Group Meeting has an important opportunity to facilitate this work.

Let me therefore say a few words about the expectations from the Expert Group Meeting. Firstly, the Expert Group Meeting should take a broad approach to the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men. It should discuss both the causes and consequences of unequal sharing, assess current policy responses and suggest improvements to the policy framework, and ways to strengthen implementation at both global and national levels. While there will be, understandably, a strong focus on care-giving, other responsibilities should be considered as much as possible. The discussions should cover as broad a range of responsibilities as possible – in both private and public

¹ 51/1, paragraph 31

spheres, highlighting that the work carried out by women at household and community levels are not just “chores”, as any form of household work done by women is often called, but important responsibilities with significant impact on development at household, community and national levels. In relation to caring, the focus should not only be in the context of HIV/AIDS. I am encouraged by the fact that many papers do take a broad approach and focus on important inter-linkages.

It is also important to consider the sharing of resources and decision-making required for the effective implementation of the responsibilities discussed. In many examples provided of skewed sharing of responsibilities, women face serious obstacles in the form of lack of access to property, technology, essential services, income, and decision-making powers. Faced with huge responsibilities and limited resources to carry them out, women are not only overworked and face significant health problems, but in many situations also become vulnerable to violence and trafficking and other forms of sexual exploitation.

I hope that there will be a strong discussion of the role of stereotypes in the unequal sharing of responsibilities. Stereotypes are increasingly raised in discussions in the Commission on the Status of Women in relation to many different issues. Often, however, the discussion is rather vague and it is not always clear what the stereotypes are, whether they are similar in all parts of the world, and how they can and are being addressed by different stakeholders. It is clear that stereotypes are a significant causal factor in relation to unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men and I hope that the outcome of this Expert Group Meeting will provide guidance to the Commission on how to address these in a practical manner.

Discussion of costs to society of the unequal sharing must be broadly focused – including under-utilized capacities in productive work and public life, reduced human capital development and intergenerational costs (especially for the empowerment of girls). The costs to families of men’s non-engagement must also be considered, as well as the costs to men themselves in terms of quality of relationships and personal emotional development.

The benefits of more equal sharing of responsibilities are also important to highlight – the benefits, rewards and incentives for households, communities and societies, as well as for both women and men. An emphasis on the positive aspects, for example, of caring, is important for engaging men in addressing unequal sharing of responsibilities. Men need to recognize the value of this work and the benefits, even for themselves.

Discussion of care-giving should be placed in the broader context of other responsibilities that are unequally shared by women and men. In developing countries, for example, the fact that women have a heavy physical burden in caring for children, the sick and older persons, without access to resources and services, means that they cannot adequately carry out other responsibilities, such as provision of food crops, energy and water supplies. The links between caring and women’s participation in the labour market

and in public life should, in particular, be highlighted. The transferring of the stratification in the private sphere to the public sphere is critical, as is the fact that women's labour at household subsidizes men's dominant roles in the labour market and in the public sector.

I am sure there will be an interesting discussion of the care economy and paid care and the ways in which the lack of value and status of care-giving roles within the context of the private sphere have also been transferred into the public sphere. Today we see significant migration of women for care-giving roles, as domestic workers and in the public sector. The interesting factor in these discussions is that, as women take on increased roles in the labour market, their responsibilities for care-giving and other household work are not shared more equally between women and men. Women either continue to try to cope with these responsibilities in addition to their work in the labour market, with considerably increased work burdens, or these responsibilities are taken on by other women, who often face low status, low wages, poor working conditions and, in some cases, different forms of exploitation. In 2007, for example, the Commission on the Status of Women raised the plight of young girls working as domestic servants in many parts of the world, and the unacceptable conditions these girls face, some as young as four or five years old.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has accentuated the need for increased attention to care-giving. The many challenges faced by women and girls in care-giving in ordinary circumstances are undoubtedly, as experts' papers clearly illustrate, significantly increased in families affected by HIV/AIDS. Issues and challenges in care-giving under normal circumstances are brought into stark relief in the context of HIV/AIDS. This includes the issue of resources provided, the involvement of men, and the intergenerational impacts. The physical and emotional burdens for HIV/AIDS care-givers are significantly increased. The HIV/AIDS context has also led to stigma and discrimination against care-givers and made the fulfillment of other responsibilities that women have to take care of, such as provision of food, energy, and income, exceedingly difficult. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has clearly moved the public discourse on caring beyond caring for children.

The policy response to care-giving in relation to HIV/AIDS has clearly not been adequate. This can be linked back to the fact that caring under normal circumstances is under-valued and low-status work, and to the fact that - since this work somehow always gets done - caregiving is invisible in policy contexts. "Home-based care" for HIV/AIDS patients, which is largely provided by women and girls within family contexts or in some places increasingly by volunteers, has been estimated to provide the largest share of care globally. Awareness of the role of care in the home has certainly increased and some support provided, but in many parts of the world home-based care-givers are still largely left to their own devices without support and back-up. The policy-failings in addressing this have significant impacts.

Policy responses on the unequal sharing of responsibilities are complex, particularly because, in attempting to address some the constraints faced by women in the

current division of responsibilities, it is possible to inadvertently strengthen existing stereotypes, perpetuate or even exacerbate inequalities and reinforce the status quo. Examples that come to mind include policies on parental leave, crèches and work-life balance that often seem to be based on the assumption that women have sole responsibilities for child-care and a failure to recognize the parental responsibilities of men. A transformation of both attitudes and institutional arrangements must be the goal, while at the same time supporting women and girls in their current situations.

This requires an explicit policy recognition of the existing inequalities between women and men and the negative impacts at all levels, and of the fact that this is a gender equality policy issue. It is interesting to note that the main policy rationales for change in this area have not been always explicit in terms of addressing gender inequalities. The rationales have often been primarily focused on the need to address other problems, such as declining fertility or the need to increase women's participation in the labour market for economic reasons.

Addressing inequalities in responsibilities between women and men is complex, requiring a broad policy response because of the interconnectedness of the issue. There are implications for a range of critical policy areas such as health, social welfare, family, education, and the labour market. In Sweden, for example, a former Ombudsperson for Gender Equality, has commented that it will be impossible to get more men to take paternity leave, despite progressive social policies, as long as the wage gap persists between women and men.

A critical element in bringing about change in the sharing of responsibilities between women and men will be engaging men and bringing them along in the process of change. A number of expert's papers address this issue in a very constructive manner. A lot more needs to be done to increase incentives for men, to provide adequate support to their efforts and to directly address stereotypes which work against men's involvement, such as those describing men as deficient care-givers.

I would encourage you to provide very concrete examples of positive change that have taken place in all the areas under consideration, highlighting where possible lessons learned and good practice examples. While it is critically important to highlight the gaps and challenges, a constructive and positive approach will be valuable in illustrating that change is both possible and already underway, and thus also in ensuring that the policy recommendations provided by this meeting will be given sufficient consideration in the Commission on the Status of Women.

Throughout the discussion, I am sure there will be significant emphasis on making the existing inequalities more visible and calling for greater value to be given to work undertaken by women, including care-giving. The changing of attitudes in terms of the importance of and value of this work, and other work done by women, is a huge challenge.

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While there will be many different issues opened up in this discussion – such as the care economy and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, - and it would be easy and tempting to have a very broad general discussion, I would encourage you to keep the focus on the theme before the Commission on the Status of Women - “the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men” - in order to make a meaningful contribution to the work of the Commission in this important area.

This Expert Group Meeting is encouraged to go beyond describing and analyzing problems and challenges to providing concrete policy recommendations on ways to reduce the unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS. These recommendations should be as clear and focused as possible, and where feasible, clearly target relevant actors.

The ten-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action emphasized that reliable data disaggregated by sex was critical, including for gender-sensitive planning and budget allocations. Proposals for possible indicators to measure progress in implementation of priority themes should be submitted to the Commission on the Status of Women. The Expert Group Meeting is therefore encouraged to consider possible recommendations on indicators on “the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men.” You may wish to ensure that all working groups set up during the meeting specifically focus on ways to measure progress in all the areas covered.

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This Expert Group Meeting has brought together experts from different fields who play a major role in work on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men. I am confident that your individual and collective knowledge, experience and expertise from national, regional and global contexts will provide important insights and guarantee the success of this meeting. I encourage you to share good practice examples and lessons learned from your own work.

A focused approach will be required to ensure that experts have time to discuss the relevant issues, arrive at consensus on the findings and recommendations of the meeting, and produce a concise and focused report – all within four days.

At the Commission on the Status of Women in March next year, the results of this expert group meeting will be presented during an interactive expert panel. The report of the meeting will be widely distributed to delegates at the Commission and disseminated to a wider audience through the Division’s website.

I wish you very productive discussions and an excellent outcome. I, and my colleagues from the Division for the Advancement of Women, Sylvia Hordosch and Saras Jagwanth, stand ready to assist you in any way possible.