

**United Nations  
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) in collaboration with  
International Labour Organization (ILO)  
Joint United Nations Programmes on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)  
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)  
Expert Group Meeting on  
“The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality”  
21 to 24 October 2003  
Brasilia, Brazil**

## **Aide Mémoire**

### **I. Introduction**

The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) is organizing, in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), an Expert Group Meeting on "the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality" which will take place in Brasilia, Brazil, from 21 to 24 October 2003. The Expert Group Meeting will form part of the Division's preparation for the forty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which will address this topic as one of its thematic issues.

In the Beijing Declaration, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, governments expressed their determination to encourage men to participate fully in all actions towards gender equality (para 25). The Declaration emphasized that equal sharing of responsibilities and a harmonious partnership between women and men were critical to their well-being and that of their families as well as to the consolidation of democracy (para 15). The Platform for Action emphasized the principle of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities (para 1). It stressed that gender equality could only be achieved when men and women worked together in partnerships (para 3), and that the principle of equality of women and men had to be integral to the socialization process (para 40). Specific actions aim in particular at promoting harmonization of work and family responsibilities for men and women (para 179); at encouraging men to share equally in child care and household work (para 107c); and at promoting programmes to educate and enable men to assume their responsibilities to prevent HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (para 108e).

In addition to emphasizing that policy-making processes required the partnership of women and men at all levels, and that men and boys had to be actively involved and

encouraged in all efforts to achieve the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action and its implementation (para 58), the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, adopted in 2000, identified a number of specific obstacles in relation to the implementation of various critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action. These included persistent gender stereotyping which had led to insufficient encouragement for men to reconcile professional and family responsibilities, and insufficient sharing of tasks and responsibilities by men for care giving within families, households and communities (para 21); unequal power relationships between women and men, in which women often did not have the power to insist on safe and responsible sex practices, and lack of communication and understanding between men and women on women's health needs (para 12).

The role of men and boys has also been addressed by other intergovernmental fora, including the World Summit on Social Development (1995) and its review session (2000), as well as the special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS of 2001.

## **II. Background**

Over the last decade, there has been a growing interest in the role of men in promoting gender equality, in particular as the achievement of gender equality is now clearly seen as a societal responsibility that concerns and should fully engage men as well as women. At the global level, Governments have committed themselves to gender equality in the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the 23<sup>rd</sup> special session of the General Assembly. This commitment has been reaffirmed in the outcomes of other major international conferences and summits, including the Millennium Declaration. The existing international legal framework, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and ILO Conventions, have encouraged and accelerated efforts in this regard.

The growing interest in the role of men and boys also occurred with the shift in the work for gender equality from a focus on advancing women's status to a focus on gender relations, i.e. the relations between women and men. The gender approach allows for clarification of the roles commonly associated with being male or female in public and in private life, and provides a basis for identifying differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources as well as decision-making opportunities. A better understanding of gender roles and related structural inequalities increases opportunities for policy measures and other actions aimed at overcoming such inequalities.

Changing patterns of production and reproduction are also indicative of changes in gender relations which challenge traditional images and expectations associated with men's – as well as women's – roles, such as those of breadwinner, care giver, or head of household. These developments increasingly call for a re-assessment of the roles and responsibilities of women and men, of stereotypical and traditional gender roles, and of existing power relations between women and men. Increased emphasis is also placed on men and women working together towards gender equality.

The question of unequal power relations between men and women as an obstacle to gender equality is receiving increased attention, especially with regard to violence against women. The role of men as perpetrators, and as actors in ending gender-based violence, has been studied by researchers, Governments and UN entities. Sustained attention is also being paid to the role of men in preventing HIV infection among women and girls, especially given asymmetric power relations between men and women and women's subordination and vulnerability to discrimination.

In addition, increasing attention is being paid to the role of men and boys in sharing the responsibilities to provide comprehensive care to those infected with HIV. Family members—almost overwhelmingly women and girls—usually provide care services, which are often unrecognized and unpaid. A disproportionate burden affects women's ability to access and retain work and girls are forced to drop out of school. The unequal distribution of caregiving between women and men in relation to HIV/AIDS in the household and community, especially in worst-affected countries, may also have economic implications. For example, in cases where women do not have access to paid work or may be prohibited from inheriting or owning property, a significant loss of economic support for the family in case of the death of a spouse or a father is often the result. Men have therefore an important role to play in promoting women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions, control of economic resources and full participation in decision making. It also requires a policy response based on gender equality and empowerment of women and equitable distribution of paid and unpaid work between women and men.

Men's roles in enhancing women's reproductive health and rights are also increasingly a focus of attention. There is growing recognition that the role of men is crucial in challenging, and in changing, such unequal power relations, and for effective interventions in these areas.

Full engagement of men and boys in achieving gender equality requires much greater attention to gender stereotypes and expectations about men's roles and responsibilities, and how these expectations influence male behaviour. Such stereotypes continue to place greater emphasis, as well as greater value, on the role of men and boys in public life and in the work place, as opposed to women's role in unpaid family labour, care giving and community work.

Peer pressure, socialization processes and belief systems influence adherence to gender-specific stereotypes. Ideas of the inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes, and of stereotyped roles for men and women not only limit progress in achieving gender equality, but also perpetuate inequalities and can constitute obstacles to men's abilities and opportunities for redressing gender inequalities.

While prevention of violence against women, of HIV/AIDS infection, and reconciliation of professional and family responsibilities have so far received most attention, the role of men can have decisive impact—in terms of promoting gender equality, or constituting obstacles and challenges—in many other areas. For example, unequal power relations

continue to affect opportunities for women's equal participation in decision-making in many spheres, and at different levels. Gender stereotypes continue to affect boys' and girls' educational opportunities and achievement, as well as expectations with regard to their working lives, thus perpetuating inequalities.

Consideration of this topic in March 2004 will be the first time that the Commission on the Status of Women will focus specifically on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. The session will therefore be an opportunity to build on the foundation established in the Platform for Action and the outcome document of the 23<sup>rd</sup> special session of the General Assembly, as well as in other intergovernmental processes, and to consider in a comprehensive manner the challenges and opportunities men and boys face in all parts of the world in contributing to the achievement of gender equality.

### **III. Objectives**

The overall objective of the expert group meeting is to clarify the roles that men and boys could play in achieving gender equality. The meeting will focus especially on unequal power relations between women and men, on gender stereotypes, and on socialization processes as challenges to the achievement of gender equality. In doing so, particular emphasis will be placed on the role of men and boys in the HIV/AIDS pandemic and in the world of work.

Specifically, the meeting will:

- Analyse approaches and strategies that have so far successfully focused on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality, in different parts of the world;
- Identify persistent obstacles and challenges to men's and boys' full participation in efforts to achieve gender equality;
- Analyse the extent to which factors such as poverty/welfare and rural/urban areas influence gender relations.
- Determine the value of gender equality for men, and any benefits for men and boys that may result from greater equality between women and men, considering a wide range of issues relevant throughout the lifecycle.

Based on this analysis, the meeting will:

- Make proposals as to how existing approaches and strategies focusing on the role of men and boys in areas such as prevention of violence against women can be adapted and applied to other areas, such as in particular the world of work, and HIV/AIDS prevention, using good practice examples;
- Suggest means for overcoming resistance in shifts in power relations between men and women, or mitigating their negative effects, in overcoming stereotypes, and in enhancing socialization processes that are supportive of men's and boys' positive role in gender equality, in particular in relation to the HIV/AIDS pandemic (prevention, treatment, care and support, and social stigma) and in

- relation to the world of work (paid and unpaid labour, formal and informal sectors);
- Propose means for overcoming obstacles men and boys face in contributing more actively towards achieving gender equality. This will include assessment of the role of Governments at different levels and their use of various means such as legislation, incentives, policy and regulatory measures, and awareness raising means;
  - Elaborate the roles of actors of civil society, including the private sector, in overcoming challenges and obstacles men face in actively contributing towards gender equality.

#### **IV. Expected outcome**

The outcome of the expert group meeting will be a report containing a summary of the discussion and recommendations addressed to different actors at different levels on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. The report will be widely distributed, including through the DAW Website. The findings and conclusions of the expert group meeting will also provide the basis for a report of the Secretary-General on this theme to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2004.

#### **V. Methods of work**

The expert group meeting will work in plenary session and in smaller working groups, based on the major issues identified.

#### **VI. Profile of participants**

The expert group meeting will be attended by 12 experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, as well as observers from Governments, entities of the United Nations system, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations. The United Nations will provide travel and daily subsistence allowance to the experts appointed by the Secretary-General. In selecting the experts, the criteria of geographical and gender balance will be respected. Experts will include academics and practitioners from relevant fields, in accordance with the objectives identified above.

#### **VII. Documentation**

The documentation for the meeting will include: a consultant's paper commissioned by the Division for the Advancement of Women, outlining the major issues to be discussed; and papers prepared by the experts on specific issues or case studies in line with their expertise. Observers will be invited to contribute inputs from their own perspectives. The expert group meeting will be conducted in English only. The documentation will also be available in English only.