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Sponsored by the NGO Committee on the Status of Women

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I thank the NGO Committee on the Status of Women for this opportunity to welcome you to the 53rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women. I also thank the Chairperson of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, Ms Vivien Pender, and her Executive Committee and Members at Large, for the excellent collaboration in the preparation for this session of the Commission. I would also like to express appreciation for the participation of other NGOs in the preparations for the Commission, through, for example, participation in the on-line discussion on the priority theme organized last July and in the Expert Group Meeting on the priority theme organized in Geneva in October 2008.

I do not need to convince anyone present here today of the importance of the Commission on the Status of Women as a key global forum on gender equality and the empowerment of women. The presence of 700 participants at this consultation, and the fact that over 5,000 representatives of NGOs have pre-registered for the 53rd session, is clear evidence of the role of the Commission, particularly its efforts to focus on national level implementation of global policy commitments.

NGOs have been active in the United Nations work on gender equality since the establishment of the Commission in 1946, playing critical roles in highlighting issues for attention on the global agenda; providing critical information and data; supporting implementation on the ground, including through partnering with governments on key issues; and monitoring government action on global commitments. It is critical that such engagement with the United Nations continues and is strengthened.

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It is extremely encouraging to see how many organizations at international, regional and national levels are increasingly guided in their work by the agenda of the Commission on the Status of Women. In preparation for this session of the Commission, many organizations included the priority theme of the Commission: "The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS" in their work programmes. NGOs in different regions undertook significant efforts to ensure that a broad constituency of stakeholders is aware of the themes of the Commission and engaged in preparatory processes.

This generates interest and enthusiasm for the themes being addressed by the Commission and increases direct involvement of stakeholders all around the world. It also increases the potential for implementation of outcomes in the longer term, since those

involved in the preparatory process in different ways will also be interested in learning about the outcomes and hopefully working to ensure their full implementation.

An increasing number of organizations have moved beyond focusing on the preparations for the Commission, and attendance at the session here in New York, to also developing innovative methods for sustaining attention following the adoption of the agreed conclusions on the priority theme by the Commission. Many organizations today take the outcomes of the Commission back to their constituencies at local level and work to ensure that they are well-known and used in different contexts. At national level, civil society use the outcomes effectively, working to hold governments responsible and accountable for commitments made in the Commission and to monitor and report on progress.

It is also encouraging that, increasingly, representatives from around the world attending the sessions of the Commission have gone through a preparatory programme; are briefed and mentored as needed during the session; and are encouraged and supported to incorporate the recommendations from the Commission in their day-to-day work following the session. As a result of the preparatory processes and the briefing and mentoring provided, including through caucuses, NGO representatives are well prepared for participation in the Commission; are clear about the changes they want to advocate for; and effective in follow-up to ensure change on the ground as a result of the work of the Commission.

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Implementation of policy outcomes can only be successful at national level if these outcomes are well known and systematically and effectively used. Innovative approaches are needed to ensure that the outcome of the Commission on the priority theme on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men is broadly disseminated and utilized at national level. The Division therefore encourages relevant UN entities and NGOs to engage their constituencies around the world in follow-up activities.

The resolution on the new working methods of the Commission adopted by ECOSOC in 2006 (2006/9) called for the broad dissemination of the agreed conclusions of the Commission. The Division for the Advancement of Women has therefore made all the agreed conclusions on priority themes adopted since 2006, and some of the review themes ,available in a more user-friendly brochure format. These are being broadly disseminated within and outside the United Nations. I would encourage you to use these brochures actively in your work. The agreed conclusions you will find in this format include those on the girl child, financing for gender equality, participation in decision-making and the role of men and boys.

The fact that the Commission at each session now reviews implementation of the agreed conclusions adopted at a previous session provides a new opportunity for ensuring effective follow-up and implementation, which we should fully utilize. We will have the opportunity to review implementation of the agreed conclusions on "The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS", to be adopted at this session, in two to three years time.

I hope you will create opportunities during the Commission to discuss among yourselves, and with a broad group of stakeholders, including Member States and UN entities, how the outcome on the theme of this session can be used at different levels, and how progress can be most effectively assessed and documented when the Commission will come back to review the implementation of the agreed conclusions.

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Let me now give some attention to the priority theme of this session of the Commission and the way it illustrates the important role of the Commission on the Status of Women. The priority theme has already generated considerable excitement and I am sure the discussions will be stimulating.

Many interesting findings have emerged, including the fact that the unequal sharing of responsibilities for household and care work between women and men persists across all regions, regardless of the socio-economic and employment status of women. It is also interesting that although women are increasingly entering the labour market in all parts of the world, this does not necessarily lead to more equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men.

The poor policy response to the issue is significant. Although many countries have worked to provide and improve services – such as day- care for children and elder-care outside the home, to undertake labour-market interventions such as leaves and flexible working arrangements and to provide a range of social security measures, such as child benefits and various forms of cash transfers, these efforts have not, in any way, matched the needs in many parts of the world.

It should also be noted that many policy responses to caregiving are not linked to the goal of promoting equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men. A range of policy rationales have been used – including the need to get women into the labour market; to address the care-crisis created by rapidly ageing populations or HIV/AIDS; to ensure child welfare and development; and to address the declining fertility rates in some areas.

It is high time that policy attention also focused on the need to promote gender equality and empowerment of women and a more equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men. Policy responses must challenge the existing unequal sharing of responsibilities and not build on or reinforce these. There have been examples of well-meant policy responses which have reinforced notions of women as the ideal caregivers by only providing maternity leave and part-time work for women and ignoring the responsibilities of men. Similarly cash-transfer programmes targeting the welfare of children may have conditionalities which add to the workload of women.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has also exacerbated the challenges of caregiving, in particular in areas where health systems are failing under the burden of care needs, leading to a reliance on home-based care, largely provided by women and girls. The crisis of care in the context of HIV/AIDS has highlighted the fact that, while the equal sharing of responsibilities

between women and men is important, it will not be sufficient. A range of actors must be also involved in response to caregiving – including governments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and international donors.

One important factor emerging from the research on this topic is the need for a stronger focus on men and significantly increased attention to stereotypes which are embedded in many social institutions and maintain the unequal sharing of responsibilities to the detriment of both women and men. While stereotypes result in women continuing to shoulder the major burden of household and care work, they also constrain men from taking on more responsibilities and deprive families of the benefit of the active involvement of both women and men.

The findings related to this theme highlight the importance of a body such as the Commission on the Status of Women and the critical focus it brings to social and economic development. It is highly unlikely that sufficient attention would be given to gender equality perspectives and the unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in other policy contexts – even within the crisis of caregiving due to HIV/AIDS. There is a need for a global body which works catalytically to highlight important gender equality gaps and challenges and provide policy guidance for governments, United Nations entities, non-governmental bodies, the private sector and other relevant bodies, to ensure an adequate gender-sensitive response on critical gender equality issues.

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It is a cause for concern that it may become more difficult to achieve many of the desired policy responses to this priority theme because of the impact of the financial crisis. The types of services and facilities required may not be possible because of lack of resources. A challenge will be to keep the focus on social development and gender equality priorities and needs in the context of a response to the financial crisis that is, to date, largely couched in terms of macro-economic policy and changes in the financial architecture. There is a clear interlinkage between the priority theme of the Commission and the emerging issue theme: “The gender perspectives of the international financial crisis”.

A clear linkage can also be found with the theme under review by the Commission this session: “The equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels”. Women are under-represented in decision-making processes in all areas, and lack of reliable, comparable information and data on this remains a problem. We do know, however, that women are seriously under-represented in economic decision-making. This, and their under-representation in political decision-making – in national parliaments and in political parties, certainly plays a part in the fact that unpaid work, including care-giving, is not given sufficient attention in policy-making and is un-recognized, unrecorded in national accounts and thus under-valued.

It is encouraging that the responsibilities for unpaid work and caregiving is now on the agenda of the Commission on the Status of Women, almost 15 years after the importance of this issue was raised in the Beijing Platform for Action. We must work collaboratively to

ensure that bold, practical recommendations on this theme are the outcome of the 53rd session.

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It is our hope that NGOs attending the 53rd session of the Commission will work systematically, effectively and creatively to promote the active engagement of their constituencies in follow-up to the Commission, and will ensure that the policy recommendations adopted by the Commission on the critical theme of the equal sharing of responsibilities will make a difference on the ground and result in increased policy attention and resource allocations, for the benefit of women and girls around the world. I know that we can count on your strong support in this area.

Thank you.