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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 the European Women’s Lobby, the International Council of Jewish Women, the National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, and the Women’s National Commission, non-governmental organizations 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*

We are the European Women's Lobby, the largest umbrella organisations of women's associations in the European Union with member organisations in 25 Member States of the EU and in 3 candidate countries; the International Council of Jewish women, representing women's organisations in 47 countries around the world; and the National Alliance of Women's Organisations and the Women's National Commission, both representing independent women's groups across the United Kingdom.

Across the world, it is still women who provide most family care. The gender pay gap¹ makes it less costly for the woman in a couple to reduce her employment hours, and more costly for men; men's long working hours also constrain what they can contribute outside of work. These factors reinforce gender norms in the division of labour and caring responsibilities within the household. Globally, most care is still provided through family and kin obligations, unpaid but not free: it is 'paid for' by reduced opportunities for carers. As economic productivity has risen across the world, and wage levels, the opportunity cost of caring for others increases. As women's economic opportunities increase they will not willingly choose to bear the costs of providing care unaided. Women have joined the expanding labour force in growing numbers, although they have paid a severe price in reconciling paid work with family 'duties' - what is often called the 'double burden'.

The scourge of HIV and other diseases and disability caused, inter alia, by war and the long-term effects of famine have created an increasing burden of care. Changing demographics in Europe and elsewhere in the world mean that in many countries an ageing population needs eldercare while there is no diminution in the need for childcare. Gendered longevity patterns mean that this impacts more on women as they make up more of the old and of the very old. Women's caring roles are a burden because too often, they are not taken into account when planning employment policies, working conditions, public spaces, transport systems and so forth. They are designed for able-bodied males, increasingly in cars.

In Europe and across the world, policy has generally been developed on the basis that women as well as men are expected to support themselves through paid work. However, less attention has been paid to the other side of the division of labour embodied in the male breadwinner/female carer model. Elevating financial 'independence' as an aspiration for all obscures the interdependence of all members of society, devalues care and imposes severe economic costs on the (mostly) women who provide it.

The quality of alternatives to family care is also an important issue for carers. Concern for the cared-for person's well-being is the motivation for providing care. Carers will not willingly substitute paid care of an inferior quality. Only if women can be sure that their relatives are well looked after in the paid care sector will they enter employment in the numbers that they would like. Current spending by Governments fails to meet the demand for publicly-financed care. Inadequate public spending results

* Issued without formal editing.

¹ The world average gender pay gap is 15.6 per cent, International Trade Union Confederation (2008) *The Global Gender Pay Gap*.

in care that is 'paid for' in terms of lost opportunities by those who provide it. Losses in employment opportunities are nearly always borne by women throughout their life cycle. Crucially, this has consequences in their own old age, when women typically receive lower pensions (often below poverty levels) because they prioritised caring responsibilities over paid employment. In the United Kingdom, for example, women's occupational pensions are on average nearly 40 per cent lower than men's.²

We need a radical shift in values. We need to move to an economy and indeed a society, in which everyone undertakes both caring and paid employment, and caring is seen as a valuable and productive activity for both women and men. This requires changes in men's lives as much, if not more, than women's. Such a society would value good quality care as much as economic gain, reflecting better the values held by those, mostly women, who care for others in their family at the expense of their own economic prospects. Men will not be persuaded to increase their contribution to care unless the costs of doing so are lowered. This requires a change in how care is seen and especially when men take on that caring role: as a public good and a valued role underlying the fabric of society, rather than a burden whose costs are to be minimised and shifted onto families wherever possible. It also requires significant changes to the way in which we measure economic activity. Caring has some specific features that distinguish it from other economic activities: it is a personal service, not just the production of a product that is separable from the person delivering it, but the development of a relationship which has implications for attempts to raise the productivity of care and deliver it more flexibly. We need to recognise that productivity in this area of activity is unlikely to rise significantly, and we need to measure it accordingly.

After many years of discussion, international state accounting rules do not count unpaid caring work. While it remains invisible it will be discounted in policy design. Our economies rely on women's unpaid and unmeasured contribution to maintaining the labour force through reproductive and caring roles. Measures of productivity in States are skewed while this factor is missing.

We call on Member States and international bodies, including the United Nations Statistical Commission, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank and the Commission of the European Communities to lead the debate to amend international state accounting rules; the World Trade Organisation to ensure that trade policies and agreements recognise women's unpaid labour; for state finance departments in United Nations Member States to mainstream gender into their economic and fiscal policies, and recognise and quantify the value of unpaid caring; and for the corporate business sector to take the lead in recognising their own reliance, as employers of labour, on the unpaid caregiving that renews and supports the labour force.

² Department for Work and Pensions (2007) *Pensioners Income Series Report 2005/06*. London: DWP. www.dsdni.gov.uk/statistics_and_research-pensioners_income_series.