



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
9 December 2008

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-third session

2-13 March 2009

Item 3 (a) (i) of the provisional agenda*

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 International Federation of Social Workers, a non-governmental organization 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*

The theme of the fifty-third session, the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, is extremely relevant to the 745,000 social workers around the world who continuously work to promote the rights and liberties of women and girls who suffer from economic, social, and psychological hardship because of their diminished status. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), which represents professional social work associations from 90 countries around the world, seeks to promote social justice and human rights for all people, particularly for those most disadvantaged by the current social, economic and political environment. We are especially concerned with the status and wellbeing of women in all societies, specifically in this era of tumultuous political, economic, and social changes.

In 1999, the International Federation of Social Workers developed a policy on women's issues that guides our NGOs position and directs our advocacy work on behalf of women. We view women's rights as human rights and are particularly supportive of this year's theme – The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care giving in the context of HIV/AIDS. This theme relates to the third Millennium Development Goal, which promotes the empowerment of women and endorses equality among genders. In this era of political, social and economic volatility, which has been exacerbated by natural disaster and climate change, we strongly urge Governments to consider these five crucial factors that impact women around the world:

1. Poverty

Today over 1.2 billion people live on less than one dollar a day and a majority of the world's absolute poor are female. Worldwide, women on average earn about 50 per cent of what men bring home each year. Poverty is the most deteriorating force on women's health, especially reproductive and sexual health: women and girls are often the last to eat and female health problems are considered less important than other family issues. In order to avoid starvation, parents may sell their daughters into prostitution; and mothers sometimes are forced to sell their own bodies to feed their children. (<http://www.unfpa.org/intercenter/beijing/poverty.htm>)

In poor countries girls more frequently suffer from malnutrition than boys, while in more developed countries women who live without a male partner are more likely to be poor (Beijing Conference, 1995; US Census, 2000). Indigenous women along with women who suffer from various physical, developmental, and emotional disabilities are especially disadvantaged and may have the worst struggles with poverty (IFSW, 2005).

In the past decade, the number of women living in poverty has increased disproportionately to the number of men, particularly in developing countries. In addition to economic factors, the rigidity of socially ascribed gender roles and women's limited access to power, education, training and productive resources, are also responsible. While poverty affects households as a whole, because of the gender division of labour and responsibilities for household welfare, women bear a

* Issued without formal editing.

disproportionate burden, attempting to manage household consumption and production under conditions of increasing scarcity (Beijing Platform for Action paragraphs 48 and 50). Women urgently need greater economic opportunity and mechanisms for economic and social support in order to avoid poverty.

2. The Economy

Although women do the majority of the world's work, they do not share equally in the distribution of income, savings, and wealth. Women often face discrimination signified by a lack of job opportunities, educational deprivation, and competing social responsibilities. Women are frequently the primary bread winners in families, thus economic discrimination often detrimentally affects their children and other household members. The elimination of discrimination in employment and the creation of new economic opportunities in private enterprise, agriculture, and formal places of employment are seen as enabling ways to help women overcome poverty (IFSW, 1999). Child care is often a major responsibility for women and access to affordable services is vital to increasing employment opportunities and reducing poverty. We strongly support a variety of major and innovative economic programmes that foster the economic self-sufficiency of women, including programmes that support the ownership and registration of land and other properties, micro-credit lending for family-run endeavors, and educational opportunities which are aimed at advancing economic status.

Despite declining health, women living with HIV/AIDS can benefit from micro financing opportunities. They often bear most of the responsibility for tending to children, HIV-affected spouses, and others in their extended network who may suffer from health problems. Gender inequalities make it difficult for women to access appropriate care, treatment and support (<http://www.icw.org/FAQs-womengirlsHIV>).

3. Education and training

According to the second Millennium Development Goal, primary education is a human right (United Nations, 2000). Yet, two-thirds of those who are illiterate are women (United Nations Development Programme, 1995) and this factor continuously hampers women's ability to support themselves and their families. In countries with non-mandatory, limited access to education girls often remain illiterate at home or at work. Girls who are forced to migrate because of natural disaster and man-made conflict lack the stable social and political environment which fosters education.

Schooling for girls in developing countries protects them from HIV, human trafficking and other forms of exploitation through education. Educated women are more likely to marry later, raise fewer children who are more likely to go to school, and make important contributions to family income. The education of girls reduces poverty and child mortality, improves family nutrition and health, and increases the prevention of HIV and AIDS (<http://www.worlded.org/WEIInternet/gwe/index.cfm>).

The AIDS pandemic has also greatly jeopardized the ability of girls to pursue an education. Girls of latency age have been forced to assume the role of primary care taker when one or both parents have died of AIDS, thus preventing them from continuing their own education. The educational systems of many developing countries have been weakened by the lack of available healthy, adult school teachers as many succumb to the virus. Medical spending and other institutional expenditures make it impossible for communities to fund education (http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_8657.html).

4. Health

The lack of adequate health care is an important issue for women around the world as many continue to experience poor physical and mental health because of HIV/AIDS, violence, inadequate nutrition, and a lack of preventative health care. The number of women affected by HIV/AIDS and the stigma attached to this illness infringes on mothers' ability to remain economically sufficient, thus the nurturing of children in these homes is of utmost concern.

Women around the world are increasingly becoming infected with HIV/AIDS, accounting for 50% of people living with the disease at the end of 2005. If these rates of infection continue, women will soon become the majority of people infected around the world. In many societies, women and girls are discouragingly refrained from discussing abstinence, faithfulness, and condom use with their sexual partners. Paradoxically, they are often blamed for causing AIDS and other STDs and are stigmatized once they have contracted illness. Gender inequalities and a lack of preventative, episodic and acute health care makes women more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS (<http://www.4woman.gov/hiv/worldwide/>).

5. Violence

Sexual violence against women occurs in all societies around the world despite social, economic, cultural, and political backgrounds and includes emotional, physical, sexual, and / or verbal assaults, elder abuse, sexual harassment, rape, sexual exploitation and trafficking, forced pregnancy, forced abortion and sterilization (IFSW, 1999). National laws in both developed and developing countries often do not adequately protect women against domestic violence and other types of aggression.

Sexual violence increases women's risk for HIV/AIDS. This disease also has many direct and indirect ramifications on women, including added responsibilities in caring for sick family members, loss of property if they become widowed and/or infected, and violent abuse when people find out about their HIV status (<http://www.4woman.gov/hiv/worldwide/>).

We firmly believe that the preceding five topics outline critical concerns for women throughout the world. These issues must be given serious consideration by Governments, businesses, and civil society organizations alike. Action must be taken as we move forward in advancing the status and rights of women and girls, especially those who bear a disproportionate amount of responsibility for caretaking in an era of HIV/AIDS.

References

Beijing Platform for Action (1995), adapted at United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. September 1995.

ICW (2008). International Community of Women Living With HIV/AIDS
<http://www.icw.org/FAQs-womengirlsHIV>

IFSW (1999). International Policy on Women, Approved by IFSW Executive Committee, Helsinki, Finland, June 1999.

IFSW (2005), International Policy on Indigenous Peoples, Approved at the IFSW Executive Meeting, Washington, DC, USA, May 2, 2005)

IFSW (2007) IFSW Statement of Purpose, www.ifsw.org/home, website last updated on 06.12.2007.

IFSW & IASSW (2004) *Ethics in Social Work: Statement of Principles*, adopted in Adelaide Australia, October 2004.

UNFPA (1999). Women and Poverty
<http://www.unfpa.org/intercenter/beijing/poverty.htm>

UNICEF (2008). Girls, HIV/AIDS and Education http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_8657.html

United Nations Development Programme. (1995). Gender and Human Development Report 1995. New York: Oxford University Press.

United States Department of Health and Human Services (2008). Women and HIV/AIDS
<http://www.4woman.gov/hiv/worldwide>

UN (2000). Millennium Development Goals. Adopted by all member states
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/MDGs-FACTSHEET1.pdf>

US Census, (2000) Poverty Status of Families, by Type of Family,
<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/hstpov4.html>

World Education (2008). Girl's and Women's Education Initiative
<http://www.worlded.org/WEIInternet/gwe/index.cfm>
