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the twenty-first century”**

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Organization for Women, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Role of Women in the Family

All over the world, more women are graduating from college, and less women are getting married. The increased education of women fulfils many of the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action. But, the decreasing marriage rates should be of profound concern for the social development of our future society. Consider the following statement by Richard Wilkins in the United Nations Negotiating Guide: “The weight of social science demographic research indicates that marriage has unique benefits for women and men, as well as for the children that develop from and within the marital union. Marriage offers individuals (and society) natural and inherent benefits. Indeed, the procreative and normative functions of marriage provide the very foundation of civilized society.” (The Social Role of Marriage and Family, page x).

A new family unit is formed with the government recognition of a legal marriage. The family is recognized as the “basic unit of society” in both paragraph 29 of the Beijing Platform for Action and paragraph 60 of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly (Beijing +5). Both documents acknowledge the importance of strengthening the family, and paragraph 285-a of the Beijing Platform for Action recognizes the need to formulate policies and programmes to help the family “in its supporting, educating and nurturing roles.”

This new unit of society has the potential to become a “strong force for social cohesion and integration” (Platform for Action 60) and thus governments are encouraged to “provide comprehensive protection and support (Platform for Action 29) to the family, as they design, implement and promote family friendly policies and services (Beijing +5, 82-d).

The family unit

When forming public policies, government leaders should carefully consider the impact on, and ability to strengthen, the individual family units (“Respect for the Family,” United Nations Negotiating Guide, page 1).

Family well-being is increased, within the family, through a “harmonious partnership between men and women” and the “equal sharing of responsibilities for the family” (Beijing Declaration 15). Equality within the family includes the “equitable distribution of productive assets, wealth, opportunities, income and services” (Platform for Action 58-b).

“Motherhood and fatherhood and the role of parents and legal guardians in the family and in the upbringing of children,” should be considered in the preparation of public policies (Platform for Action 60) The role of women in procreation should be given special consideration as governments facilitate “access to appropriate health-care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant” (Platform for Action 94, 97, and Beijing +5 72-i),” with “ready access to essential obstetric care, well-equipped and adequately staffed maternal health-care services” (Beijing +5, 72-b).

As children are welcomed into this family unit, each child has the right “to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents” (Platform for Action 274-b). “The upbringing of children requires shared responsibility of parents” (Platform for Action 29), in their “supporting, educating and nurturing roles” (Platform for Action 285-a).

The role of parents

The nurturing care of a loving mother and father can be the most significant contribution toward building a world of peace. It is primarily the responsibility of the parents to mold the character of the future citizens of the world. It is the parents who have the greatest interest in the long-term well-being of their children. All levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions should respect and support the vital role of parents. (“Respect for Parents,” United Nations Negotiating Guide, page 13).

Governments should “strengthen policies and programmes to support the multiple roles of women in contributing to the welfare of the family” and recognize the important “role of parents and legal guardians in the upbringing of children.” Such programmes should promote the “shared responsibility of parents” (Beijing +5, 82-c).

“Parental support and guidance” should be provided to “adolescents to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality” while “taking into account the rights of the child to access to information, privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent, as well as the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents and legal guardians to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance” (Beijing +5, 267).

Parents should be encouraged to “treat girls and boys equally and to ensure shared responsibilities between girls and boys in the family” (Beijing +5, 285-c) and “promote equality, cooperation, mutual respect and shared responsibilities between girls and boys from pre-school level onward and develop, in particular, educational modules to ensure that boys have the skills necessary to take care of their own domestic needs and to share responsibility for their household and for the care of dependants” (Platform For Action 83-b).

Dignity and worth

All actions by international, national, and local governments, and their various health and education agencies, should be centred on a recognition and respect for the dignity of all human life — before as well as after birth. (“Respect for Human Life,” United Nations Negotiating Guide, page 7).

Gender based violence is “incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and must be combated and eliminated” (Beijing +5: 59). “Girls and boys and women and men” should be taught “how to communicate without violence” (Platform for Action 125-g).

“For the girl child to develop her full potential she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded. ... now is the time to recognize the human dignity and worth of the girl child” (Platform for Action 39).

As parents “provide an environment conducive to the strengthening of the family,” they should provide “supportive and preventive measures which protect, respect and promote the potential of the girl child” and “ensure shared responsibilities between girls and boys in the family” (Platform For Action 285-b, c).

Religious values

The Beijing Platform for Action acknowledges that “Religion, spirituality and belief play a central role in the lives of millions of women and men, in the way they live and in the aspirations they have for the future. ... Religion, thought, conscience and belief may, and can, contribute to fulfilling women’s and men’s moral, ethical and spiritual needs and to realizing their full potential in society.” (Platform for Action 24).

Breakdown of the family

Stable marital unions promote the health, safety and social progress of women, men and children. Unstable marital relations promote poverty, crime, abuse and social disintegration. Society would do well to heed the fact that “the family as an institution exists to give legal protection to the mother-child unit and to ensure that adequate economic resources are passed from the parents to allow the children to grow up to be viable adults.” (Richard Wilkins, United Nations Negotiating Guide, page x).

“Family disintegration, population movements between urban and rural areas within countries, international migration, war and internal displacements are factors contributing to the rise of female-headed households.” Family breakdown has contributed to the feminization of poverty as “Female-maintained households are very often among the poorest because of wage discrimination, occupational segregation patterns in the labour market and other gender based barriers” (Platform for Action 22).

Research has documented that “natural family structures benefit nearly every aspect of children’s well-being. This includes greater educational opportunities, better emotional and physical health, less substance abuse, and lower incidences of early sexual activity for girls, and less delinquency for boys.” (Craig Hart, “Combating the Myth that Parent’s Don’t Matter,” Marriage and Families, August 2000).

“Efforts to devalue motherhood, diminish parental involvement with children, and to devalue religious norms bring with them high and tragic social costs” (Richard Wilkins, United Nations Negotiating Guide, page x).

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