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INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

Key policy initiatives on equal sharing of responsibilities
between women and men, including in the context of HIV/AIDS

Written statement*

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Equal Responsibility for Sharing and Care giving with an Emphasis on Men and Boys

This presentation is based on the report of the Expert Group Meeting on “The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS” organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women in October 2008 in Geneva.

One of the main ideas relating to men and boys to come out of the Report of the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) is the need for establishing a new social contract between men and women. Changing global economic conditions, new political configurations, sustained challenges to patriarchy worldwide, increasing empowerment of women, and new patterns of public discourse, have all combined to forge new alignments and social relations between men and women. A new social contract would suggest different terms and conditions of social intercourse. We must, in other words, find new ways of relating to each other. The old ways have outlived their usefulness. New challenges demand new patterns of behavior, new arrangements for living and social reproduction, and new ways of thinking about the sharing of responsibilities, and caring for each other and our family.

These ideas about change were long in the making. The Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development promoted the idea as early as 1994, for increasing the sharing of responsibilities between men and women. This position was followed up by the Beijing Declaration and the Beijing Platform of Action which even more clearly spelled out the problems of the unequal division of labor and how the burden of responsibility of women circumscribed their available options and restricted their public participation at the economic and political levels of society. Given women’s disproportionate burden of responsibility and caring, in conjunction with the fact that most of this work goes unrecognized, means that the true contribution of women to the society and economy is never properly assessed. In short, the marginal economic and social status of the contribution of women is undervalued and often under-appreciated.

In response to the calls for change in international fora, the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women organized an Expert Group Meeting in Brasília, Brazil in 2003, whose focus was to begin to find ways to incorporate the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality. The 2004 agreed conclusion about involving men and boys in the process of promoting greater equality called for increasing the sensitivity of men and boys to these imbalances of responsibility and care provision, providing training programs to address this problem, and essentially recognizing that if social transformation is a desirable outcome, then it could only be realized with the cooperation and participation of men and boys. The current Report of the EGM is a continuation of these efforts at dismantling firmly established social norms of behavior of men and women, which have become encrusted in socially constructed layers of power, privilege and prestige. This arrangement then places the importance of the public sphere over that of the private sphere, the contribution of men and boys over that of women and girls, all of which undermines the real essence of democracy and the full benefits of citizenship for all. An important complement to this social arrangement is an elaborate ideological, legal, cultural and often religious rationale that is put in place to resist any and all changes to the status quo. The business of change therefore is a slow grinding one, filled with frustrations, but the benefit of waging the struggle is incalculable.

related to the asymmetry of power that was mentioned earlier. Violence as a mechanism of control is not only a physical threat to women's security, but it also limits their options for realizing social progress. Violence then is anathema to the idea of equal sharing of responsibilities, and of the provision of care. There is a clear and understandable emphasis on the impact of violence on women in this Report, as in other reports and analyses. Women after all, are more likely than not, to be the victims of violent attacks.

What is often muted in many accounts about violence is the enormous amount of violence that transpires between men. It is not intended here

It is not surprising that women and girls bear the brunt of the provision of care for people living with HIV/AIDS. The Report points to an estimate that suggests that women and girls provide 70 to 90 per cent of the care worldwide for people living with this disease. Older women are

Economic Crisis and Equal Sharing and Caring

No one could possibly imagine that change of the magnitude suggested by the Report would be easy, but a new dimension has emerged to complicate the issue. It is the current economic crisis.