



**Commission on the Status of Women
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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 Mothers' Union,
non-governmental organisation in consultative
status with the Economic and Social Council**

Mothers' Union is a Christian membership-based organisation with 3.6 million members across 78 countries. Motivated by their faith, members run grassroots initiatives that support marriage, family life and flourishing relationships within communities. Members also lobby national governments and international bodies on issues encountered in their communities, including gender inequality and discrimination against women.

Overview

In 2009 many responsibilities in the private and public realms are still divided along gender lines. Across the world, most **domestic tasks** are still carried out by women and girls, although men still tend to carry responsibilities for tasks such as household repairs.

In the case of **caring**, worldwide the responsibility still lies largely with women, although fathers now contribute between a quarter and a third as much time as mothers to direct childcare.¹ Women are more likely to balance caring for children and other dependents with paid employment and thus make up the majority of those in part-time work and other flexible working arrangements – for example in the UK 50% of women's jobs part-time, compared to about 16% of men's.² Access to decent paid parental leave is very unequal - only in Canada, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden can fathers access more than one month's paid leave³ compared to 97% of countries that offer long term paid maternity leave.⁴

Across the world women are also more likely than men to care for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAs). The burden falls heaviest on the developing world where 95% of the 33.2 million PLWHAs live but access to treatment is the most limited, due to cost and

¹ *FatherWorld*, Fatherhood Institute, June 2005 <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=14&CID=256>

² *Labour Force Survey (LFS)*, UK Office for National Statistics, April - June 2008

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1654>

³ http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/lab_par_lea_pai_pat_lea-labor-parental-leave-paid-paternity

⁴ <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/ww2005/tab5c.htm>

suitability of medication – even though treatment can cost as little as \$87 per patient per year.⁵

Men still carry the household **decision making** responsibilities within many societies, and in some areas of the world women are not permitted to make decisions about financial or property matters. Across the world, only 27% of men take responsibility for **family planning** through using male methods of contraception⁶, yet many women are denied any choice in family planning methods. In **public life** worldwide, decision making responsibilities are also still largely held by men, for example heads of state (87%), industry leaders and religious leaders.

It is important that responsibilities are not prescribed according to gender, nor their value based on whether a man or women carries them out. Acknowledging the role of the family, whatever its structure, is central to the discourse of sharing responsibilities. If injustice is learnt within the home, this is where it must be challenged first and foremost. However, the family must not be dismissed with suspicion as merely an oppressive force on women. Both women and men must be engaged to develop flourishing relationships within the family, and thus root values such as equality and justice in wider society.

Mothers' Union

Mothers' Union accords a high status to caregiving and supports families to examine how they can care for one another through sharing responsibilities. The Mothers' Union **Worldwide Parenting Programme** builds up individuals' parenting skills and enables participants to share their experiences of raising children. Trained parenting facilitators also work to break down barriers to the equal sharing of responsibilities within families. The programme has been successful in engaging men and helps them to explore the important role that they have to play within the family.

"Tom, a father attending my parenting group, told me that even his work mates said he had changed since attending the parenting group. He often used to lose his temper, and they couldn't believe how he now no longer flies off the handle without thinking."

- Parenting Facilitator, UK

The Mothers' Union **Literacy and Development Programme** (MULDP) not only teaches numeracy and literacy skills – learners also discuss and address challenges within their families and communities, especially gender inequalities and domestic violence. Through the programme women have gained greater responsibilities in household and financial decision making and community leadership.

"Before we joined the programme, we didn't understand each other [spouses] but we can now sit together and solve our problems together. Traditionally, me as a woman would be blamed for many things... This practice is no more. We now share the work in the house and are also involved in making decisions with the men."

- Female learner, Sudan

⁵ Medecins Sans Frontieres <http://www.msfnaccess.org/main/hiv-aids/utw-interview-with-campaign-pharmacist/>

⁶ *World Contraception Use 2003*, UN DESA Population Division
http://www.imccoalition.org/facts/Attitudes_toward_male_contraception.pdf

“True gender [equality] is sharing the house between a man and a woman. This time we do things together. This [literacy] circle has made us aware through discussion.”

- Male learner, Malawi

The Mothers' Union **Family Life Programme** (MUFLP) in Uganda empowers families and community members to work together to address issues that affect them, in particular through looking after their health, their homes and the local environment. Community members also raise awareness of the transmission, prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS through drama and song. Those with HIV/AIDS are supported by trained home-based carers (HBCs), who in turn are supported by trained Mothers' Union workers. Family and community members caring for children orphaned by AIDS also receive support from HBCs and learn about growing food and medicinal plants - thereby improving nutrition and health - and about income generating activities. In these cases gender is irrelevant – caring is the priority and several of the home-based carers are male.

“I was very shy before, but today I am very happy because as a PLWHA I am not discriminated against in my group. I now have access to drugs and look and feel much better. No one would know that I am HIV positive. Medicines have enabled me to be strong and participate in IGAs [income generating activities]. We have poultry and vegetable gardens which provide good nutrition and health for us and I am now living very happily.”

- MUFLP participant, Uganda

By supporting male and female family members and whole communities, Mothers' Union is building capacity at the grassroots for future generations of women and men to share and value responsibilities equally.

Mothers' Union's recommendations to governments

A holistic approach is needed to promote the equal sharing of responsibilities. As well as supporting families and communities to lay the foundations for gender equality, governments need to facilitate the wider development of gender equality - culturally and institutionally. Governments should play their role by:

1. Supporting grassroots programmes that promote and support the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men within the household and wider community.

1.1 Governments should ensure that such programmes are provided with sufficient resources and a supportive environment in which to operate, including those with a particular focus on HIV/AIDS.

2. Implementing policies that support women and men to share responsibilities equally within family and work life and within the wider community.

2.1 Governments need to implement policies that enable both women and men to reconcile work and family life, for example flexible working practices and parental, particularly paternity, and carer's leave.

2.2 European Union States must commit to the Barcelona childcare targets⁷ to improve the provision of care for children and other dependents, in order to ensure the equal opportunity of women and men to participate in paid employment and consequently economic decision making.

2.3 Governments also need to challenge the stereotyping of responsibilities in culture and the mass media; for example by following the example of the European Parliament's non-legislative resolution on how marketing and advertising affect equality between women and men (resolution INI/2008/2038⁸).

3. Committing unreservedly to achieving Millennium Development Goal 6 (combat HIV/AIDS), in particular targets 1⁹ and 2¹⁰.

3.1 Governments must invest in: all forms of HIV/AIDS education, including awareness of the availability of in-country treatment and reducing stigma; HIV prevention; and treatment programmes, at a level that will halt and reverse the spread of the virus.

3.2 Governments must work together to ensure that costs, pharmaceutical patenting laws and international agreements, as well as gender inequalities, do not prevent those needing treatment from accessing it when needed.

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⁷ Providing childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.

⁸ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/file.jsp?id=5597832>

⁹ Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS

¹⁰ Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it