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Statement submitted by Organisation Mondiale des associations pour l'éducation prénatale, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

At a time when the economy is changing fast, Organisation Mondiale des associations pour l'éducation prénatale wishes to highlight the importance of flexible working conditions, including maternity leave, paternity leave and family leave during the time of pregnancy and after birth.

Organisation Mondiale des associations pour l'éducation prénatale also wishes to address the necessity for countries to better define what “work” and “employment” are, especially for women and girls.

This has been an ongoing subject of discussion. In its first Maternity Protection Convention (1919), International Labour Organization (ILO) expressed the necessity to enable women to successfully combine their reproductive and productive roles, and prevent unequal treatment in employment due to their reproductive role.

More recently it was stated:

“Maternity is a condition which requires differential treatment to achieve genuine equality and, in this sense, it is more of a premise of the principle of equality than a dispensation. Special maternity protection measures should be taken to enable women to fulfil their maternal role without being marginalized in the labour market. (International Labour Office, 1996, p. 42)” * “Maternity at work, A review of national legislation” — ILO Geneva, 2012

Maternity at work

The importance of paid work to the lives of most adult members of society makes the intersection of maternity and work a particularly critical focal point for efforts to improve both health and equality.

Maternity protection for women workers contributes to the health and well-being of mothers and their babies, and thus to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 3, which seeks the reduction of child mortality and improvement of the health of mothers. By safeguarding women’s employment and income security during and after maternity, maternity protection is also essential for ensuring women’s access to equality of opportunity and treatment in the workplace, and progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 5: promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment .

Breastfeeding

“A woman shall be provided with the right to one or more daily breaks or a daily reduction of hours of work to breastfeed her child.” [Convention No. 183, Article 10(1)].

It is also mentioned that “Breastfeeding contributes to the health of both mother and child and is particularly important in circumstances where unsafe water can be a risk for the baby”.

Paid work — Unpaid work

In October 2013, at the ILO headquarters in Geneva, the International Conference of Labour Statisticians clearly recognized the need to better measure

paid and unpaid work and to propose the first international statistical definition of “work”. Unpaid care work is “work”, and governments have agreed on important changes on how work and employment will be defined.

It has been agreed during this meeting that unpaid care and domestic work will statistically be categorized as work, which is a key step towards recognition.

It is now widely recognized that sustainable development and women’s empowerment are intrinsically linked. However, women’s empowerment, especially mothers’ empowerment, cannot happen as long as the issue of unpaid family care work and maternity leave is not seriously addressed.

Through the ILO, Indicators for “Combining work, family and personal life” measure the existence and scope of maternity, paternity and parental leave laws. As such, the “Combining work, family and personal life” is a substantive element of the Decent Work Agenda.

Recognition

Unpaid family care work remains one of the main obstacles towards substantive gender equality. The European Institute for Gender Equality 2015 Gender Equality Index Report shows that time is the issue: “This domain [of time] highlights the core of the division between women and men in the European Union: the wide gender gap in activities related to care. Throughout all [European Union] Member States, it is women that perform the bulk of these caring activities, with extremely wide gender gaps between the time spent on caring and educating children and grandchildren, as well as time spent on cooking and housework.”

Education

Organizations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Bank have highlighted the central role of Education across all United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. As such it is a critical factor for enabling societies to alleviate poverty by improving productivity. The logic is simple, alleviating poverty in societies involves boosting Gross Domestic Product, which requires a productive population, which in turn is dependent on education.

Unfortunately, this cause-effect chain works in both directions. While education is indeed a factor in alleviating poverty; poverty, together with hunger, are factors which obstruct education, which in turn limit productivity growth.

Infrastructure

Women’s empowerment and sustainable development cannot happen if women continue to spend so much time compensating for the lack of public infrastructure and services: according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Research in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that women and girls in low-income countries spend 40 billion hours a year collecting water — the equivalent of a year’s worth of labour by the entire workforce in France”, a huge amount of time that could be better used in income-generating activities and education.

A transgenerational perspective on poverty

Organisation Mondiale des associations pour l'éducation prénatale believes that a resolution to this conundrum requires a transgenerational perspective on poverty and success.

A transgenerational perspective looks at the cause and effect chain across generations. It examines how interventions in one generation can avoid harm being perpetuated in future generations. And nowhere is the evidence more conclusive than in providing support for mothers during pregnancy and early childhood.

Evidence in developed countries shows that a child that is not ready for preschool education is unlikely to succeed in primary and secondary education. Numerous economic studies have shown that investing in early parenting and early childhood care is 5-6 times more effective than intervening to solve problems later in life.

Macrolevel studies have shown that better conditions during pregnancy (lifestyle, nutrition, etc.) can boost the gross domestic product of a country by 12%.

What this means at a micro level is that by supporting the mother during pregnancy, and through early childhood care, we allow normal brain development and prepare the child for education and productive participation in society. Therefore, maternity leave, paternity leave, family leave is a very important way to allow mothers and fathers to spend some time together, and share the workload to ensure the best care for the newborn baby.

Conclusion

Therefore, Organisation Mondiale des associations pour l'éducation prénatale calls on all government to:

1. Develop a national policy that supports mothers and fathers in their caring roles, especially during maternity leave, paternity leave, family leave during pregnancy and the early years of this child, to ensure that babies benefit from loving and nurturing environments and relationships
2. Recognize the importance of these critical early years for child development, especially between conception and age 3, and make it an investment priority as it is the base for a healthy and productive citizenship.

Organisation Mondiale des associations pour l'éducation prénatale is an international non-governmental organization, active on four continents with General Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council and with permanent representatives at the United Nations in New York and Geneva. Organisation Mondiale des associations pour l'éducation prénatale aims to collect and disseminate information about advances in scientific and psychological fields that relate to prenatal life and the importance of early childhood care, early parenting and education. These are shown to be major contributors to the physical, emotional and mental health of future generations, and to more equitable and caring forms of society.