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Statement submitted by International Federation for Family Development, 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

The International Federation for Family Development has been dedicating significant efforts to integrate a family perspective to aim at responding to challenges faced by families policymaking. Such family empowerment would promote policies at the national, regional and international levels by removing social, political, legal and economic barriers to their active participation in society. Such a step forward would enable families and its members to assert greater control over their resources and life choices and by providing instruments to recognize the time; effort and money that committed families invest in their children.

Nowadays, household production constitutes an important aspect of economic activity and ignoring it may lead to incorrect inferences about levels and changes in well-being. The calculations suggest that between one-third and half of all valuable economic activity in countries of The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is not accounted for in the traditional measures of well-being, such as Gross Domestic Product per capita. So, it seems that the unpaid work and care, largely dominated by cooking, cleaning and caring, is an important contributor to societal well-being in ways that differ both between countries and between men and women. It contributes not only to current household consumption (e.g. cooking) but also to future well-being (e.g. parental investments in raising children) and to community well-being (e.g. voluntary work).

According to Professor Diane Elson, unpaid care work refers to “all unpaid services provided within a household for its members, including care of persons, housework and voluntary community work.” These activities are considered work, because theoretically one could pay a third person to perform them [ELSON, 2000]. In 2008 at an Expert group meeting on Unpaid work, Economic Development and Human Well-being held by the United Nations Development Programme, she presented a model of three interconnected dimensions to incorporate the issue of unpaid care work into the development agenda: recognition, reduction and redistribution:

- Recognition means that the unpaid care work done mainly by women is acknowledged as work and production. This means that it is made visible to those who profit from it and to policymakers at the local and national level. This includes gathering qualitative and quantitative data that can be used by policymakers and civil society organizations in designing projects. Recognition may also take the form of compensation of unpaid care workers, including these workers in social security programs, and including unpaid care work in national statistics.
- Reduction of unpaid care work involves reducing the burden for the individual (usually a woman) and society as a whole. This frees time for women and girls to pursue other activities such as formal jobs or political participation. Unpaid care work can be reduced through the introduction of infrastructure and technology such as wells that provide easier access to clean drinking water reducing the amount of time spent collecting water. The burden of unpaid care work can also be reduced through increased public services like childcare.

- Redistribution of unpaid care work to more fairly distribute the amount of work done by individuals includes redistribution among men, women, households, markets, the state and civil society organizations. While the overall amount of care work remains the same, the share of responsibilities, time and resources is more equitably distributed [ELSON, 2008].

While unpaid work — and especially the gender division of unpaid work — is to some extent related to a country’s development level, country cross-sectional data suggest that demographic factors and public policies tend to exercise a much larger impact. The regular collection of time-use data can thus be of tremendous value for government agencies to monitor and design public policies, and give a more balanced view of well-being across different societies. In particular, learning about people’s time allocation ensures a better understanding of a society for policymakers concerned with efficiency and equity of social policies. The consideration of unpaid work for relative inequality and for inequality over time may be part of a future agenda for the OECD as new time use surveys become available for many countries in the next few years.

The economic impact of unpaid work

A recent OECD study adds that unpaid means that “the individual performing this activity is not remunerated”; care means that “the activity provides what is necessary for the health, well-being, maintenance, and protection of someone or something”; and work implies that “the activity involves mental or physical effort and is costly in terms of time resources” [FERRANT, 2014].

Unpaid work matters a great deal and we can find it everywhere around us. It is central to our lives and essential for our well-being, though it is largely invisible in terms of statistics. It underpins all societies but it is perceived to be less valuable as it is frequently not considered as work. Its contribution to economy and development remains hidden. If domestic tasks and direct care were assigned a monetary value, they would constitute between 10% and 39% of Gross Domestic Product, but it is generally unrecognized and undervalued by policymakers and legislators. In fact, well-being is often proxied by aggregate income or production per head and changes in well-being by the corresponding rate of growth. However, neither measure is not fully adequate if there is a considerable amount of unpaid work nor if growth occurs because of substitution of paid for unpaid hours of work [WEINROBE, 2005]. Moreover, “ignoring it may lead to incorrect inferences about levels and changes in well-being. Since women traditionally do much of the unpaid work, so neglecting to include it underestimates women’s contribution to the economy” [STIGLITZ, 2009].

In securing basic needs, the provisioning of necessities and conveniences of life occur through a combination of paid and unpaid work in four key institutions: market, state, households, and nongovernment (non-profit) institutions. In general, the contribution of each of these institutions in securing material needs varies by the level of economic development of the country people live in and in accordance with the prevailing public provisioning policy regime. Be it paid or unpaid, people spend about one-third of their time working.

In turn, the degree to which a person is able to procure ‘goods’ and ‘services’ from the market depends on whether markets are relatively well developed, as well as the ability of household members to participate in paid work and earn sufficient income to make the necessary purchases. Income poverty due to joblessness or substandard living wages limits access to marketed inputs.

Moreover, independent of how poor or wealthy a household is, some time must be devoted to “overhead household production”, i.e., time needed to transform purchases into consumable final goods. Wealthy households are in a position to often substitute hired services for their own unpaid overhead household production contributions. Cooks, gardeners, or laundry services do just that.

Finally, households that are income poor and are not able to buy such services may also face difficulties in paying the customary user fees to have running water or electricity in their home, make use of public or private transportation, or to avail themselves to durable household assets that reduce household production time, such as an electric stove, refrigerator, or washing appliances. In yet other cases, severely poor households may live in settlements where basic services such as sanitation, electrification, and water delivery are completely missing [ANTONOPOULOS, 2009].

Changing household time distribution

In all countries, women do more of such work than men, although to some degree balanced—by an amount varying across countries—by the fact that they do less market work [MIRANDA, 2011]. The unequal distribution of unpaid care work between women and men represents an infringement of women’s rights and also a brake on their economic empowerment. Women typically spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work than men [MIRANDA, 2011]. Time is a limited resource, which is divided between labour and leisure, productive and reproductive activities, paid and unpaid work. Every minute more that a woman spends on unpaid care work represents one minute less that she could be potentially spending on market-related activities or investing in her educational and vocational skills [FERRANT, 2014].

On account of gendered social norms that view unpaid care work as a female prerogative, women across different regions, socio-economic classes and cultures spend an important part of their day on meeting the expectations of their domestic and reproductive roles. This is in addition to their paid activities, thus creating the ‘double burden’ of work for women. How society and policy makers address issues concerning care has important implications for the achievement of gender equality: they can either expand the capabilities and choices of women and men, or confine women to traditional roles associated with femininity and motherhood.

Sharing household responsibilities

Shared responsibility at home may be the missing link that influences gender gaps in labour outcomes. The gender gap in unpaid care work has significant implications for women’s ability to actively take part in the labour market and the

type/quality of employment opportunities available to them. The socially prescribed and entrenched gender roles that denote women and girls as care providers can undermine their rights, limit their opportunities, capabilities and choices, and so impede their empowerment. Prevailing gender norms mean that, across all societies, women and girls undertake the bulk of unpaid care work such as looking after and educating children, looking after older family members, caring for the sick, preparing food, cleaning, and collecting water and fuel. This unequal burden of unpaid care undermines women and girls' rights (to decent work, to education, to health, to rest and leisure), limits their opportunities and, therefore, impedes their economic empowerment. It hinders women from seeking employment and income, which in turn holds them back economically.

Among the experience of our Federation activities, most of the fathers aspire to share equally in caregiving with their spouse/partner, but often are unable to bring this desire to reality. Fathers need time to develop parenting skills, but they do not have it. The fact that men do not bear children is obviously an unchangeable biological fact. The fact that men do not rear children is not. People are not born with the gene that teaches them all they need to know to be effective parents — neither women nor men. From the first days and weeks after childbirth, many (we hope most) women have the opportunity to spend time with their children, which facilitates both bonding with their new-born and developing competencies as new parents. In contrast, few men are provided with an opportunity to spend significant time with their young children [HARRINGTON, VAN DEUSEN, HUMBERD, 2011].

The missing link may be found in the share responsibility at home. Women bear greater responsibility for unpaid care than men. While there is a growing body of evidence about the role of fathers in children's lives, there are also knowledge gaps, and the quality of evidence varies. Although a concerted effort has been made to capture evidence about the positive influences of fathers on child development and well-being, it is pertinent to note that studies to date have more often focused on the negative impacts of poor or absent fathering on children [WOOD, LAMBIN, 2013]. Acknowledging and encouraging the responsibility of fathers and the contribution of men to families, develop policies to address the impact of the absence of males on family well-being and promote active fatherhood may be the way by which many women will be able to reach their economic empowerment.
