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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 the Women’s National Commission, 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.

* E/CN.6/2009/1.



Statement*

The Women's National Commission (WNC) is the official independent advisory body giving the views of women throughout England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The WNC has over 500 partner organisations and individual partners drawn from women's voluntary and community organisations, professional associations, trade unions and faith groups. In addition, the WNC works with women's organisations in the European Union and United Kingdom-based international organisations.

The WNC believes that ensuring the equal sharing of caring roles between women and men will lead to increased gender equality more broadly and improve the lives of not only women, but also men and children throughout the world. Such an achievement would see a greater level of work-life balance and a change of attitude towards gender roles. In short, changing of attitudes is both a prerequisite for ensuring more equal sharing of caring roles as well as hopefully, an outcome.

The WNC welcome the focus on the equal sharing of caring roles between men and women at the fifty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Despite existing international legislation from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which provides that *all workers with family responsibilities should not be subject to discrimination*,¹ combining caring responsibilities with the work place is an ongoing challenge that is steeped in discrimination.

Historically, entrenched gender roles have meant that responsibility for the upbringing of children and caring for other family members has been undertaken by women, often on an unpaid basis. There are huge challenges in this: first and foremost, it means that a change in attitudes is absolutely essential for achieving any change. Furthermore, there are challenges in relation to pension and old-age poverty for women as well as in relation to the work place and how it has been defined as a result of it. Though much has changed with the more progressive provision of services to support parents and carers (childcare and other care services) as well as flexibility in working life (maternity and paternity leave, flexible and part-time work) women are still fundamentally disadvantaged at the point of entering the labour market due to their caring responsibilities. The challenges are even greater for Black, minority and ethnic (BME) communities where additional barriers like language and access to culturally sensitive services can be an issue.

Violence against women (VAW) is a cause and consequence of gender inequality and women experiencing violence still have unequal access to protection and support; and this can impact on their caring and parenting ability.

Additionally, women with insecure immigration status and asylum-seeking women face further barriers because they do not have equal access to public funds and therefore, to protection, safety and support.

* Issued without formal editing.

¹ ILO Convention on Workers with Family Responsibilities: Convention No. 156

Evidence of the situation in the UK

Childcare

The United Kingdom lags behind European Member States in the extent to which it provides affordable quality childcare. The WNC recognises that, although there is good progress being made in England, Scotland and Wales to build a national childcare infrastructure, there is still a lack of available and affordable childcare across the United Kingdom. There are 3.8 children under 8 for each childcare place in England.² Childcare places are significantly scarcer in Northern Ireland. In 2006, there were 92.5 day care places per 1000 children aged 0-4, compared to 195.5 places in England. The typical cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two is £152 a week in England, amounting to over £7900 a year; a rise of 6% from last year.

Care services

As the population ages, it is expected that more people will have care responsibilities, rising from the current 6 million to 9 million within the next 30 years.³ It is important to recognise the large gender disparity within the older population. In the United Kingdom, women form 59% of 75-84 year olds; over three quarters (76.5%) of over 90 year olds; 73 % of all people aged over 65; 81 % of people aged 85 and over who live alone; and almost three quarters (74%) of all people aged 85 and over in England living with a chronic illness.⁴ Almost nine out of ten (88%) of care assistants and home carers in Britain are women.

Maternity and Paternity Leave

Britain has very unequal parenting arrangements- mothers are entitled to one year's paid and unpaid maternity leave, whereas fathers are entitled to just two weeks' paid paternity leave. Although these new arrangements are welcome, fathers will choose to take annual leave on full pay where they can. While men continue to be paid more than women, it makes little sense for the father to take this leave. There is little evidence of acceptance by employers of men having time off for family responsibilities, and whilst the WNC welcome these improvements to maternity leave and pay, the introduction of adoption leave and pay, and rights to flexible working need to be further improved⁵. In addition, each parent is also eligible for 13 weeks parental leave, but because this is unpaid, only 4% of fathers and mothers use this form of leave in Britain⁶.

² Equal Opportunities Commission, *Facts and Figures about Men and Women in Britain*, 2006

³ Carers UK estimate, Response to DTI Work and Families Consultation, 2005

⁴ Tomassini C, 2005 The demographic characteristics of the oldest old in the United Kingdom ONS

⁵ WNC CEDAW Shadow Report: April 2008-para 180

⁶ Equal Opportunities Commission: Response to Commission of the European Communities Green Paper *Confronting demographic change: A new solidarity between generations*, 2005

Flexible and part-time work

At present, most part-time jobs in Britain are confined to a narrow range of sectors and in low paid, low skilled work in, for example retail, cleaning and catering. They also tend to have less senior positions within organisations- only 4% were managers or senior officials.⁷ The consequence is that the average hourly rate of pay earned by a woman working part-time is 40% less than the average hourly pay of a man working full-time. And productivity is seriously impaired because employers are failing to fully utilise the skills potential of part-time workers.

What needs to be done now?

The WNC welcomes government legislation and initiatives to address the equal sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men as outlined in the 5th and 6th Periodic reports of the Government of the United Kingdom to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, the WNC would like to see greater progress and therefore, highlights the following recommendations, some of which have been outlined in greater detail in the WNC's CEDAW Shadow Report to the CEDAW Committee:

- That the Government of the United Kingdom continues to enhance legislation for flexible working. In this time of economic downturn this is an opportunity for Government to firmly embed its commitments rather than retract them. Without flexible working arrangements for both men and women, the equal sharing of caring responsibilities will never be a reality. Research shows that far from compromising business objectives, offering carers flexible ways of working brings impressive business results. Some of the business benefits of supporting carers include: lower staff turnover, lower absenteeism and increased productivity.⁸
- That the Government of the United Kingdom closes the pay gap and reduces economic constraints on families when deciding how to organise work and childcare.
- That the United Kingdom adopts good models of practice from other Member States, in particular Nordic countries, where the benefits for society, business and individuals of shared maternity leave are well understood.
- That evidence is gathered on the positive impact of the equal sharing of caring responsibilities, in particular the economic impact on societies would be compelling evidence for convincing the Government of the United Kingdom and Governments of other Member States to invest more in supporting the equal sharing of caring responsibilities.
- More media and awareness raising campaigns on the benefits of equal sharing of caring responsibilities. This would go some way in changing deep-rooted attitudes about gender roles; particularly, tackling workplace culture that makes it embarrassing for men to take time

⁷ Britain's hidden Brain drain-Final report of the EOC investigation into flexible and part-time working. EOC 2005

⁸ <http://www.carersuk.org/Employersforcarers/Thebusinesscase/Thebusinessbenefits>

off for children (“he was left holding the baby”; “he is spending more time with the family”); and promoting to children in schools the possibilities for future sharing of work and childcare between men and women.

- More support for positive role models of men as carers. Research shows that there are better social, educational and emotional outcomes when fathers are involved. This challenges gender stereotypes and goes a long way in influencing the attitudes that children can have to being parents themselves.
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