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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Make Mothers Matter International (MMMI), a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 February 2013]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Mothers, unpaid work and the right to food

Make Mothers Matter International (MMMI) wishes to congratulate the Special Rapporteur on the Right to food, M. Olivier de Schutter, for his excellent report on “Women’s Rights and the Right to Food”.

This report rightly highlights women’s major contributions to agriculture and to the realization of the Right to Food. It also gives a comprehensive overview of the many obstacles and the cycle of discriminations that women face for the realization of this right, and more generally for the realization of their human rights.

Among these obstacles, the report highlights the issue of women’s “time poverty” stemming from their disproportionately large contribution to the unpaid care work burden that remains largely invisible and unrecognized. The time that women, especially mothers with young children, spend on unpaid household chores, children or older parents care limits their time and opportunities to engage in income generating activities (that would allow them among others to buy food for their family, and finance education for their children). Women’s unpaid work also reduces their options and choices in life, as well as their bargaining power within the family. It is at the core of discrimination and women’s poverty.

In developing countries

In developing countries, especially in rural areas, women’s time and unpaid work must often compensate for the lack of basic public infrastructure and services (such as access to water & sanitation, energy, transports, childcare, ICTs...), and time saving technologies (such as stoves, water pumps, etc...).

In addition, women often work in family farms, as unpaid workers, or engage in subsistence farming to secure food for their families, all work that comes on top of their family care responsibilities. Furthermore, in many countries of Africa, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has even further exacerbated women's care burden.¹

Too few or only limited “time-use” surveys have been conducted to precisely measure the magnitude of unpaid work in developing countries, notably in rural areas. Women’s major contribution to food security and the economy therefore remains largely invisible and unrecognized.

As countries industrialize, a large part of households food production and caring for family members is transferred to the market, which translates into a rise in GDP and gives an impression of improvement in living standards that does not necessarily correspond to the reality.

In developed countries

A 2011 OECD study² estimates the monetary value of unpaid work in OECD countries at about one third of GDP, a staggering number that shows its importance in economic terms. This study also shows that in spite of increased participation into paid work, women continue to bear the bulk of domestic tasks and unpaid care work: women in OECD countries spend more than twice the time men spend on unpaid work.

¹ “Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis” - UNAIDS, UNFPA & UNIFEM 2004.

² “Cooking, caring and volunteering: unpaid work around the world” - OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, No. 116, OECD Publishing.

The fact is that even in developed countries, where most households have access to public infrastructure and services as well as time saving technologies, mothers juggle between paid work, their family, and household chores, and greatly suffer from time-poverty.

This reality is largely confirmed by a recent “Survey on Mothers in Europe” conducted by the European delegation of MMMI,³ where when asked about their requests to policy makers, a majority of European mothers expressed their desires for:

- more time for them and their family;
- choices about childcare and the balancing between work and family responsibilities;
- as well as a better social and economic recognition for their role as mothers and the importance of family care and education.

Furthermore, the current economic and financial crisis and the subsequent austerity measures of some governments have resulted in cuts in social benefits and care services for children, elderly and people with disabilities.⁴ These force women to take on even more unpaid caring responsibilities and further reduce the time they have to engage in paid work, reducing the available income for food.

Another implication that this time-poverty has on the Right to Food is that, pressed by time and small budgets, mothers tend to buy ready meals and processed foods instead of more time consuming and too often more expensive fresh vegetables and fruits. As already highlighted in a previous report of the SR,⁵ such processed food is often too rich in salt, sugars and fats, and their nutritional value is often questionable when not outwardly unhealthy. In turn, this negatively influence children’s eating habits, and has dire consequences on their future health (obesity, diabetes, etc).

Mothers also need time to educate themselves and develop the knowledge and skills they need to make appropriate food choices, develop positive attitudes to diet and health, and transmit these to their children.

Recommendations

MMMI therefore supports the SR’s general recommendations:

- Investments in any infrastructure that can reduce / relieve women and girls’ disproportionate unpaid drudgery (especially water and energy) should have a high priority for development and the realization of women’s Rights including the Right to Food,
- The specific time and mobility constraints of mothers, and more generally workers with family responsibilities have to be recognized and accommodated (notably with policy aiming at reconciling family and professional life).

However, MMMI would like to draw the attention on 2 points of the report of the SR:

- MMMI strongly supports and encourages states to implement a combination of “female school stipend programs” and “take home rations” offered to girls in vulnerable socioeconomic situations when they attend school. These programs not

³ “What matters to mothers in Europe – 2011 Results” – European Delegation of Make Mothers Matter International (http://www.mmmeurope.org/ficdoc/2011-MMM_BROCHURE_What_Matters_Mothers_Europe.pdf).

⁴ How women are being affected by the global economic crisis and austerity measures Jane Lethbridge, Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU) - October 2012.

⁵ The right to an adequate diet: the agriculture-food-health nexus" - A/HRC/19/59 – 2012.

only ensure girl school attendance, but would greatly relieve poor families, and mothers in particular, of the burden of feeding the family, thus freeing time for income generating activities;

- MMMI fully supports child centered policies such as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) described in the report, but denies the claim by authors cited in the report that “child-centered policies such as those illustrated by CCT programs tend to sideline ‘the equality claims of adult women and attention to their needs [...] in favor of those of children, including girls’”. On the contrary, MMMI supports the idea that mothers have to be prioritized: it is not a gender issue, nor a stereotype. Our study on European mothers has shown that once they become mothers, women think differently: “before it was me, when I became a mother it became ‘us’”. Mothers, who approximately represent 80% of women, do want child centered policies.

Furthermore, MMMI would like to make the following recommendations:

- Unpaid care work should be recognized as “work”, that also has a major social and intergenerational role and value for society; women should also be allowed to have the option of fully assuming care responsibilities (such as caring for infant and young children, disabled people, elderly or sick persons) and be supported for this indispensable work (for example through access to social security);
- Governments should regularly conduct time-use surveys in order to make unpaid work visible and its evolution taken into account along other GDP components when devising policies. Adding unpaid work, notably care work and subsistence production to current economic indicators, would provide a better indication of people’s actual wellbeing in a country or a region that should be the objective of development;
- The post-2015 development framework should include indicators both on the total amount of unpaid work, and on its share between men and women; unpaid work affects many dimensions of development, including food security and nutrition, and should be at the core of poverty reduction policies through recognition, reduction and redistribution.⁶

⁶ UNDP Policy Brief gender equality and Poverty reduction – Unpaid care work – Issue 01 - October 2009.