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General Debate 3 (a): Actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development at the global, regional and national levels

3 (b) Special theme of the fiftieth session² of the Commission based on the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the key actions for its further implementation

**Statement submitted by Make Mothers Matter — MMM,
a non-governmental organization in general consultative status
with the Economic and Social Council³**

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.

¹ [E/CN.9/2017/1](#).

² Changing population age structures and sustainable development.

³ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

How support for mothers may impact the population age structure

Population projections are important factors to consider for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. They also give countries the opportunity to think about their development as a whole.

Global population trends show a long-term transformation towards an ageing of the population, both in developed and developing countries. According to the latest projections, “the share of older persons is set to double by 2050, while the share of children and youth will decline. The working-age population is expected to stay at one half of the population” (Expert Group meeting on “Changing population age structures and sustainable development”, New York, October 2016). The challenge is to mitigate the economic and social impacts of this demographic transformation.

Worldwide, mothers are deeply concerned by this demographic shift:

- They live it through the family life cycle, successively giving birth, caring for children, grandchildren and ageing parents: mothers are increasingly lifelong unpaid caregivers, and much more than men.
- As result of the unequal distribution of care responsibilities, they face higher risks of poverty in old age than men and women without children — in a context of already declining pension benefits.
- Living longer than men, they also form the largest segment of the older population, especially in the older age bracket (“54 per cent of those aged 60 or over and 61 per cent of those aged 80 or over” according to “Populations Facts”, UN DESA/population Division, No. 2014/4/rev 1, October 2015).

At the same time, fertility decline is the most important driver of population ageing, especially in developed countries. Slowing this decline by providing better support to mothers and families can help alleviate some of the problems. Poverty reduction is also essential so that social budgets can be reallocated to the increasing needs of the older segment of the population, thereby improving the sustainability of ageing societies.

Every mother and every child count: taking an intergenerational perspective on poverty for more sustainable ageing societies

A recent study published by The Lancet, “Advancing early childhood development from science to scale”, confirms the importance of focusing attention and care on mothers and young children. According to this study: “Around 250 million — or 43 per cent — of all children under the age of five in low and middle-income countries are at higher risk of not reaching their developmental potential due to stunting, poverty and disadvantage. Moreover, children in low and middle-income countries face many adversities which, together, affect their health, well-being and learning throughout their lives. This not only has long-term effects on individuals, but also contributes to the cycle of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion that affects all countries” (The Lancet Early Childhood Development Series — Core Messages, October 2016).

Such adversities notably include:

- Maternal mortality: too many children still become orphans at birth, as globally maternal mortality remains unacceptably high, with an estimated 216 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2015 (“Trends in Maternal Mortality 1990 to 2015”, Executive Summary, WHO, 2015).
- Premature births may adversely affect the developmental potential of children. In addition, in 2015 out of 15 million premature babies, 1 million died from complications.
- Unregistered birth: as mentioned by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon during the forty-ninth session of the Commission on Population and Development: “When people are not counted, they are excluded”. Unfortunately worldwide, an estimated 230 million children under 5 years of age remain unregistered and without an identity. This means that they may not be able to access such public services as health care and education, or benefit from their country’s social policies. In turn, this threatens their development and future.
- Malnutrition during pregnancy and in early childhood results in developmental delays, weight-loss and illness with both short term and long-term negative effects on physical and cognitive development.
- Violence or neglect: research in neuroscience has confirmed that their early experiences shape a baby’s brain development and have an important impact on their mental and emotional health as well as their physical, cognitive and social development. Adverse situations like violence or neglect can prevent a child from reaching its full potential, with lifelong negative and costly consequences for themselves — and for society.

Investing in the health and well-being of mothers and young children is one of the best investments a country can make, not only for the intrinsic human right of a child to develop to their full potential, but also to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and improve the long-term sustainability of ageing societies.

Recommendations

- Promote and support girls’ education: “the impact of mother’s education on early childhood survival increases with the level of education” (Population Facts, December 2015, No. 2015/3).
- Apply “WHO recommendations on antenatal care for a positive pregnancy experience” (WHO, November 2016), to save lives and reduce premature births.
- Raise awareness among parents, grandparents, caregivers, health care and early childhood professionals on the importance of nurturing care during the “critical years” of child development, i.e. from conception to age three.
- Recognize and support mothers in their essential role of caring, nurturing and educating their children.
- Recognize the essential value of Unpaid Care Work and address its unequal distribution between men and women, and between households and other stakeholders, through Care policies. As highlighted in UNRISD flagship report

2016, “Policy innovation for transformative change”: “Framing public care services, basic infrastructure, labour and social protection policies under the umbrella of care policies is a game changer”.

- Implement adapted policies to facilitate work-family balance, especially during early childhood (paid maternity and paternity leaves, paid parental leave, quality childcare services, nursery schools, preschools or others facilities).
- Ensure universal birth registration, so that every child is counted and has an identity. This will allow every country to better understand the present and future economic needs of its population and increase the chance that every child access health services and education as well as benefit from targeted policies.
- Expand the use of information and communication technologies to facilitate birth registrations — as it has been done in United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda. This could also provide access to medical support and advice by health-care professionals when the basic facilities are far away.

Caring for the elderly: increases of women’s unpaid care work and related poverty risk in old age need to be addressed

The general structure of the world population is evolving into one in which there is a significant increase in the population aged 65 and older. This poses economic and social challenges for all countries, both developed and developing, as their age dependency ratio is increasing, threatening the financial sustainability of health care, social services and pensions.

Older persons cannot be left behind. Globally, about 50 per cent of seniors do not receive any pension; and for those who do, it is not always enough to ensure a decent life. In most countries, women are less likely than men to receive a pension and, where they do, their benefit levels are usually lower. For example, in urban China, poverty rates among older women are 3 to 4 times higher than among older men. In the European Union, older women are 37 per cent more likely than men to live in poverty, a fact that can largely be attributed the 40 per cent average gender pension gap. And according to a recent report of the European Parliament, the situation is even worse for mothers, the gap widening with the number of children (“The gender pension gap: differences between mothers and women without children”, European Parliament’s Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality July 2016).

The situation is likely to worsen in the future, since caring for elderly parents will certainly be a growing part of women’s unpaid family care work. Today in Mexico, for example, housewives already care for approximately 65 per cent of seniors.

Additional recommendations

- Develop a social protection floor that can cover the needs of the elderly and allow a life in dignity.
- Stop considering older persons as a homogenous group: the needs of the population aged 70 years or older are likely to be different from those of the

population aged 90 years or older. Countries need more age and gender disaggregated data to develop targeted policies for their ageing population (e.g. 60-70, 80-90, 90-100, over 100).

- Put in place policies like family leave to allow workers, both men and women, to visit or care for their ageing or sick parents and other relatives in need of care. An example of such policy is the right to request flexible working conditions, which has been put in place in the United Kingdom for all workers.
 - Recognize the unpaid work of caring for a child, an older relative or another family dependent as valuable “work” that gives status and rights to caregivers (e.g. access to social protection or implementation of a Social Protection Floor, education and training, a voice in the democratic system, etc.).
 - In particular, recognize the periods dedicated to unpaid family care work in the calculation of pension rights (“care credits”), as these periods are essential to society well-being and contribute to the economy and the building of tomorrow’s workforce. These periods should be recognized as contributory as it already is the case in several countries
 - Develop a specific family policy for grandparents who raise their grandchildren.
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