



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
8 November 2024

English only

Commission for Social Development

Sixty-third session

10–14 February 2025

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: Priority Theme: “Strengthening solidarity, social inclusion and social cohesion to accelerate the delivery of the commitments of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development as well as the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”

Statement submitted by Make Mothers Matter, 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

Mothers are pivotal agents of change and drivers of social development. Despite calling for placing “people at the center of development”, recognising family and women as key agents of social development, and committing to fulfilling “our responsibility for present and future generations”, not all signatory states to the Copenhagen Declaration acknowledge the specific contribution of mothers, nor intentionally enable their transformative potential. In today’s world, not only is mothering usually unsupported and undervalued, it also happens in an environment of policies and social norms that often penalises mothers.

To achieve true social development and gender equality, it is essential to a) recognise and support the contributions of mothers to the ideals of the Copenhagen Declaration, b) identify impediments and challenges to their role as agents of change, and c) act promptly to address those issues for the betterment of humanity.

Mothering as an essential driver of social development

Mothers play an essential role in ensuring social development because they are the primary educators and caregivers of the generation to come. A mother’s well-being is crucial to ensure that her child grows in a safe, healthy and nurturing environment and develop to their full potential to be able contribute to society later in life. Child-rearing, household management and caring are the backbone of a functioning society.

Mothers provide the physical, mental and emotional nurturance needed. They set the foundation for life-long skills to relate to others, particularly those different from us, promoting pro-social behaviour, more peaceful interactions and greater empathy. In the face of crises such as wars, famine or displacement, mothers’ role of safety nets is enhanced.

Mothers and other unpaid caregivers must therefore be recognised and empowered as key actors of social development.

The unpaid care work performed mainly by mothers, a barrier to achieving social development

Unpaid care work is constituted by the physical work and chores that women (mostly) have to do as a result of gender norms and/or the absence of proper governmental support.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), worldwide, more than 16 billion hours are devoted every day to unpaid domestic and care work. It equates to 2 billion people – about a fourth of the world’s total population – working full-time with no pay.

There is however a great gender imbalance in terms of who performs unpaid care and domestic work. Globally, women perform about 4 hours and 25 minutes of unpaid care work every day, compared to 1 hour and 23 minutes for men – 3.2 times higher (according to the United Nations Development Program).

The time mothers spend on performing care work is not properly recognised and prevents them from flourishing in other domains that are better recognised by society such as the workplace. In 2018, the ILO estimated that 41% of women currently viewed as ‘inactive’ were outside the labour market due to their unpaid care responsibilities. Indeed, the time mothers spend on unpaid family care work is less time they can devote to developing their personal education, advancing their career and therefore safeguarding an economic independence. In the absence of proper

support, it can be difficult for mothers to combine their parental responsibilities with the other roles they have. They are expected to constantly juggle between their various identities: mother, partner, friend, employee, citizen, etc. without complaining. This scenario can be the source of great suffering. It can prevent them from escaping poverty and contributing fully to society and the economy, further marginalising them.

Poverty and crises increase the pressure of unpaid care responsibilities

Mothers and children are amongst the most vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion, and violence. The multiple and intersecting global crises we face exacerbate this vulnerability. When priorities shift from providing public services to debt servicing, mothers pay the highest price. When austerity policies reduce investment in healthcare, education or social protection, mothers have to adapt and perform the work public services no longer provide. Environmental degradation and climate change also affects women disproportionately.

Ironically, these challenging contexts tend to increase unpaid care work. A 2022 report from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Secretariat highlights that women in developing countries spend more time on unpaid care work than women in developed countries. Similarly, due to difficulties in accessing public infrastructures, resources and services, women living in rural areas tend to spend more time on care responsibilities compared to those living in urban areas.

Climate change reinforces these difficulties as accessing water or food can become more complicated. The need to go further to collect water induces an increase in the time that women spend caring for others.

Additionally, with the ageing of populations globally, there is an increasing need for care. Oftentimes, women have to care both for their children and their parents as they get older. The need for care increases and induces a need for people who care for children, parents and other members.

What does unpaid care work have to do with the Copenhagen Declaration?

30 years on, the issues identified by the Copenhagen Declaration, in particular poverty and social exclusion, are still very much relevant. Women who are mothers continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty, especially in developing countries. The unpaid care work they perform limits the time and resources they can spend on accessing education, generating an income or participating in public life. Motherhood has a financial, social and human cost that can be unacceptably high.

The Copenhagen Declaration puts at its core human well-being. In order to ensure communities' sustainable well-being and prosperity, one ought to recognise that it can only be achieved if mothers, who nurture and raise the adults of tomorrow, are given proper space and means to thrive.

The right of mothers to fully participate in all areas of life regardless of their maternal status is also a matter of social justice. Women should not be penalised for being mothers. To create more equitable and inclusive societies, one needs to properly recognise and value unpaid care work. Although not explicit in the Declaration, unpaid care work is crucial to achieving its goals.

How to properly recognise unpaid care work and empower mothers

The first step in order to strengthen solidarity, social inclusion and social cohesion is to recognise all members of society and value their contributions. In particular, unpaid care work remains invisible and taken for granted. It is imperative to formally recognise this foundational work, first by measuring it.

According to the ILO, unpaid care and domestic work accounts for 9 percent of global GDP, and the one performed by women equates to 6.6% of GDP. It is therefore an important economic sector, that must be acknowledged, measured and taken into account in all policymaking at every governance level.

With target 5.4 of the 2030 development agenda and its underlying indicator, governments have committed to measure unpaid care and domestic work. However, because of their costs and complexity, many States have yet to conduct the necessary time-use surveys to measure the time spent on unpaid care work. As Make Mother Matter recalls in its 2022 HLPF written statement this target has not received the attention and traction it deserves.

As a possible alternative, the ILO has launched in 2020 a Labour Force Survey module to measure time-use. Building on this initiative, one can respond to the pressing need for statistics on domestic and care work.

Additionally, women, in particular mothers, should not be solely responsible for unpaid care and domestic work. Society has a responsibility in ensuring the well-being and prosperity of all its members, and that the development of some does not hamper that of others. Promoting equality and mother's dignity should be envisioned as part of social development and social cohesion objectives. In particular, the private sector must take its share of responsibility and costs.

Decision-makers have a key role to play in designing policies that provide better support to mothers and other unpaid caregivers so that they can choose to dedicate some time to other activities than just caring obligations if they wish to. In particular, mothers should be given the chance to secure productive employment and have a proper professional or political career. States have the duty to create the conditions for women to thrive regardless of their maternal status.

Policies such as paid parental leave and affordable childcare can serve to incentivise parents to equitably share caregiving responsibilities and allow them to better balance parental and professional work. Such policies can relieve the pressure on women and create an environment where individuals, regardless of their parental status or their gender can thrive and develop. By empowering women and providing equal opportunities to all, one fosters social cohesion.

One should however take a life-course approach and account for the specific moments in life where economic and social protection has to be reinforced such as during the child-rearing years or widowhood.

Society also fails to recognise that those tasks are not as trivial as they seem, that they require and develop skills – in particular life skills, like any other work. Recognising these skills, and considering these moments as a valuable experience would contribute to the recognition of unpaid care work.

To enable women to fully participate in the political and economic spheres, their access to education, employment, healthcare and decision-making positions must be facilitated – in particular when they are mothers.

The multiple gender gaps will not be redressed unless states and the private sector mobilise collectively to achieve gender equity in both the public and the private spheres.

Call to Action and recommendations

It is clear that the broader objectives of the Copenhagen Declaration can only be achieved by addressing the issue of unpaid care work.

We therefore call on States to:

- Invest in data collection, in particular time-use surveys, to measure the value of unpaid care work and make it visible to both society and decision makers (commitments 9 and 10 of the Copenhagen Declaration);
- Raise awareness on the imperative of a more equitable redistribution of this work, and encourage boys and men to take their share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities (commitment 5);
- Improve current paternity leave policies to give the means to fathers or coparents to fully engage in caring responsibilities (commitments 1 and 2);
- Introduce legislation to ensure that companies assume their share of responsibility and costs;
- Invest in social services to ensure access to affordable childcare and other essential public services to support unpaid caregivers (commitments 1 and 2);
- Invest in basic public infrastructure and services (including water, sanitation, energy, transportation and ICT) with a care lens to reduce the time spent on domestic work (commitments 2 and 3);
- Enhance physical and mental health support for mothers, with a particular attention to vulnerable mothers such as indigenous, disabled or marginalised mothers (commitment 6);
- Protect women who are mothers in the face of crises (economic shocks, fertility crises, pandemics, etc.) to ensure continuous social development (commitment 8).

It is time for decision-makers to prioritise policies that recognise and support the invaluable work of caregivers, beginning with mothers. Gender equality and social cohesion are the cornerstones of an inclusive society that allows every individual to thrive and contribute fully.

Endorsers:

Soroptimist International

International Presentation Association

UNANIMA International
