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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

Unpaid family care work & motherhood: the unfinished business of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action

Make Mothers Matter is an international NGO that since 1947, has advocated for the recognition and support of mothers as key actors in social and economic development. From the outset in 1995, Make Mothers Matter has supported the Beijing Initiative. As we approach the thirtieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and its adoption, it is time to reflect upon its progress worldwide for women who are mothers.

This landmark document laid the groundwork for transformative changes towards gender equality and the empowerment of women. It has remained a milestone commitment for the advancement of women's rights, including the rights and well-being of mothers.

While a lot remains to be done, progress in key areas must be acknowledged:

- **Maternal health:** according to the World Health Organisation, maternal deaths have decreased by 44 per cent since 1990, a notable drop that can be explained by improved access to skilled birth attendance and antenatal care.
- **Access to education for mothers and their children:** World Bank data shows that the literacy rate for female adults above 15 has increased over the past 30 years from about 70 per cent in 1995, to nearly 84 per cent in 2022, a significant progress that also impacts children as we know that educated mothers have healthier and more educated children.
- **Economic empowerment and poverty reduction:** different policies and strategies have been used to alleviate poverty and improve the livelihoods of women. For example, access to credit and financial services through microfinance has contributed to women's economic empowerment. Social protection programs have also been key in providing safety nets to cope with life risks, be they illness or unemployment. With Cash Transfer Programs, some governments have been able to help women meet their basic needs and those of their children. More generally, changes in legislation and mentalities have greatly contributed to improving women's economic agency.
- **Legal protections and social policies:** the expansion of legal protections for women who are mothers in the workplace has had a positive effect through better employment protection, as well as the expansion of maternity and parental leave and benefits. Improved access to affordable and high-quality childcare also has allowed mothers to engage more beyond their parental responsibilities.
- **Work-life balance:** the recognition of the need to invest in childcare and other public services to support parents and other unpaid caregivers, as well as the wider implementation of paid maternity/parental leaves and flexible working arrangements, have all contributed to consolidating women's participation in the labour market. For example, the European Union Work-Life Balance directive which was adopted in 2019 was a significant step forward.

Despite all the positives, progress has been uneven and has stalled in most countries – even in high-income countries where resources are more important, and the development of social policies and economic protections more comprehensive.

The current backlash on gender policies with the comeback of conservative governments worldwide is also worrying. Women's rights, in particular their reproductive rights and their right to work, continue to be contested. In unstable areas

where conflicts and economic or social instability disrupt communities, mothers are particularly at risk of seeing their rights eroded.

According to Equal Measure 2030, between 2019 and 2022, about 40 per cent of countries worldwide stagnated or declined on gender equality indicators. Currently, no country is on track to achieve gender equality by 2030.

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic exposed the limits and fragility of the progress made and shed light on how heavily our economies rely on care work, whether unpaid or (under)paid. It suddenly became clear how much care work is essential for the functioning of families, communities, society and the economy, and how women continue to shoulder the majority of this vital work, which remains mostly invisible, taken for granted, unrecognised and undervalued in economic, social and political terms.

The pandemic also showed that without proper governmental support systems, such as affordable and accessible childcare, paid leaves, flexible working arrangements, or comprehensive social protections, unpaid caregiving work and responsibilities that overwhelmingly falls on mothers significantly impact their economic participation, financial situation and overall well-being.

The reality is that women are too often penalised for being mothers: they face particular challenges and suffer from specific discriminations in accessing the labour market, in wages and in promotion – the so-called ‘motherhood penalty’, which was not recognised in the Beijing Platform for Action.

More generally, the issue of the inequitable distribution of unpaid care and domestic work – which is at the heart of gender inequalities and which directly connects to motherhood – has not been properly addressed by the Beijing Platform for Action: it is the unfinished business of the Beijing Conference.

Thirty years later, care has finally become more widely recognised and discussed: it is now clearly part of the global development, economic, and gender equality agendas. Yet, it remains to be fully understood and integrated into economic and social policies.

So how can we leverage the momentum and address the inequities and injustices of unpaid domestic and care work, which are particularly acute for mothers?

Target 5.4 of the 2030 Agenda provides some answers, but we have argued in a written statement to the 2022 High-Level Political Forum, that this target not only has not received the attention and traction it deserves, but does not go far enough.

Here are our recommendations to recognise and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work, and support unpaid caregivers, in particular mothers.

Recognition

- First, one needs to recognize unpaid care work as work, vital work, which continues to be mostly invisible, taken for granted and overwhelmingly carried out by women and girls – an inequitable distribution which is a cause of social and economic injustice for women, in particular when they are mothers.
- Unpaid care and domestic work must be made more visible through regular measurements: this is what the indicator associated with target 5.4 is about. Yet, the majority of countries have not conducted a single Time-Use Survey to measure the time spent by men and women on this work.
- Unpaid care work sustains families, communities, society and the economy and it has a huge economic value, estimated at \$11 trillion/year or 9 per cent of

global Gross Domestic Product if valued at an hourly minimum wage. Unpaid care work is therefore an important economic sector, that must be acknowledged and taken into account in all policymaking at every government level.

- Social protection policy is one important way to recognise and support unpaid caregivers.
- Supporting unpaid caregivers must also be framed as an investment, not a mere expense to be minimised. In particular, investing in mothers is investing in children, the future of our society.
- It is time to consider care as a right to acknowledge the specific needs and rights of care receivers, give adequate recognition and support to caregivers, and guarantee their human rights. Framing care as a right would put obligations on Member States to promote and protect the human rights of both care receivers and caregivers, particularly benefitting children and mothers.

Redistribution

- Because it benefits everyone, unpaid care work should be everyone's responsibility: governments must promote a more equitable distribution of responsibilities, work and costs, not only between men and women but also across society, with everyone/every stakeholder taking their share (principle of co-responsibility).
- Governments and employers must address gender stereotypes (through education, campaign, etc.) and promote men's/fathers' caregiving roles: it is a triple-win strategy as it not only benefits women, but also children and men themselves.
- They must also provide parents with adequate paid maternal, paternal, parental and other carers leave policies, encouraging both to accompany their child's development, especially in the early stages of life. Leaves of proper duration and with proper compensation can induce changes in the distribution of care responsibilities and break the gendered dynamics at play in the household that currently disadvantage women.
- The private sector also has a key role to play in supporting parents and other unpaid caregivers by creating and maintaining family-friendly work environments, and providing on site creche.

Support

- Governments must provide accessible public infrastructure and services (including basic services like water, energy, transportation, ICTs, health, education, etc.) that answer the needs and constraints of unpaid caregivers. At local level, urban planning also has a key role to play in optimising access to these infrastructures.
- Governments should in particular ensure accessible and diverse quality childcare options to allow parents, mothers in particular, not to trade their careers to fulfil their family obligations. This is a critical lever for increasing women's participation in the labour force and fostering their financial independence. Generally speaking, government policy should ensure that parents have real choices when it comes to work and childcare solutions.

- Fostering community support, for example by supporting civil society initiatives like the mothers' centres promoted by Mothers Centers International Network for Empowerment (an associate member), can greatly support families.
- Single mothers' families must be given particular attention and support. Many civil society initiatives exist that provide professional and financial literacy training, legal and psychological counselling, and other support services targeting single mothers; they deserve backing.
- Last but not least, education is key. We know that educated mothers have healthier and more educated children. Parenting education, information and support would also greatly help parents in facing the challenges of raising children, in particular during the critical early years.

Investing in care is investing in the well-being of society and our future. In particular, mothers play a critical role in both the family unit and the broader economic and social fabric of communities. When they are recognised as such and adequately supported through effective policies, resources, and opportunities, the benefits ripple across various dimensions of societal well-being – from healthier families and stronger economies to greater equality and more resilient communities. Empowered mothers shape the future.
