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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 Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, 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*

Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII is an international private association of Faithful of Pontifical Right present in five continents (Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and South America) and actively involved in AIDS projects, especially in Zambia, the United Republic of Tanzania and Kenya. Since the early 80s the Association has been at the forefront of the fights against AIDS by sharing directly the life of the AIDS victims (adults and children) and by advocating removing the root causes of the phenomenon.

The Association is committed to:

- Caring for the infected and affected by HIV/AIDS (*people living with AIDS*, orphans and vulnerable children, street kids, widows/widowers) by:
 - *Welcoming people living with AIDS (children and adults) in family-homes, therapeutic communities, families.*
 - *Promoting support groups of people living with AIDS*
 - *Running projects for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (Rainbow Model of Care, Cicetekelo Youth Project for street kids etc.)*
- Advocacy (Service of International Justice, accreditation to the United Nations)
- Participating in the Italian NGOs Monitoring Network for AIDS
- Health-development and Antiretrovirals projects (Kenya, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia)
- Elaboration of the “Tree model” on the vicious circle of AIDS and Poverty
- Networking with other NGOs

Members of the Association who work as missionaries in Zambia, Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania have witnessed throughout the years the great gender imbalance between women and men in caring for AIDS patients and orphaned children and the numerous injustices women are subjected to.

Not only are women the most infected by HIV/AIDS, they are also the most affected in terms of physical, moral, spiritual, social burdens created by the devastating impact of the HIV epidemic and the vicious circle between AIDS and poverty.

* Issued without formal editing.

Women are still subjected to property grabbing at the death of their spouse, female children and young girls are still sexually abused because of the wrong belief that having sex with a virgin can cure AIDS; grandmothers are still called to care for numerous grandchildren because Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART) is not yet reaching all the eligible AIDS patients who need drugs now; and young girls are dropping out of school to look after their sick parents and their young siblings.

The great majority of home-based care volunteers visiting the sick at home, helping the family members with washing, feeding the patients, cleaning the yards, distributing medicines and food, accompanying patients to hospitals, are women. In fact, a demographic profile depicts a largely female ageing volunteer cadre with a rising number of widows with multiple dependents.

On the contrary, in the best scenario, men are mostly keen to attend seminars, workshops, eventually to become counselors or lead small NGOs and community-based organizations, but, very rarely, are they involved in the commonly needed above-mentioned tasks. The few men who are home-based care volunteers and perform also the so-called “feminine tasks” may be subjected to the teasing of peers and other family members so that other men are reluctant to volunteer. The worst scenario shows unemployed men who are found in taverns, bars and chatting with friends on the streets, doing nothing.

In African societies, especially, women are still put in a submissive role and traditional stereotypes are very strong. Nevertheless, women prove to be on a daily basis the backbone of the societies, not only in managing households and subsistence farming but also in small scale entrepreneurship. Women, who have to carry out also small business to guarantee an income for their families, are taken away during the day from the care of their small children who are often left under the custody of the young sisters and brothers.

In the Rainbow project micro-credit initiatives carried out in Zambia to alleviate the burden of families in caring for orphans and empowering households, the most successful ones, with more than 95% return of the loans, have been the agricultural micro-credits given for the great majority to women in rural areas.

In poverty stricken countries like Zambia, the United Republic of Tanzania and Kenya, promoting equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS, means to tackle the issue from several angles, in a comprehensive manner and with a multi-sectoral approach.

Considering the high level of unemployment, the widespread poverty affecting the majority of people, the still high prevalence of HIV/AIDS with its catastrophic impact on society, the poor quality of Public Health Services, the high level of stigma and the existing social/cultural barriers, to achieve something on the theme of equal sharing of responsibility between men and women means to work in a concerted effort and simultaneously on realizing all the Millennium Development Goals. These goals are interlinked.

Men should be more involved in maternal health programmes (ante-natal clinics); voluntary Counseling and Testing services should introduce a specific educational package to sensitize men on gender issues.

It is also important to tackle such a theme bearing in mind the natural and complementary differences between men and women that are a resource for all. While it is an undeniable right to get rid of cultural stereotypes accumulated throughout the centuries, which make women submissive to men and not recognized in their dignity and contribution to the society, it would be wrong to deny such natural differences between women and men. In this light, equal sharing of responsibility should sound rather as equal sharing of different responsibility according to the gender.

There is need to raise awareness in the communities, to break stigma and social barriers for women, to alleviate poverty and create employment, to fight alcoholism, to introduce gender policies at workplace and at all level of society. Churches, Government, NGOs and community-based organizations, civil society at large have a great role to play.

Education in schools is paramount; efforts to reach the second Millennium Development Goal, (Achieve universal primary education) should not just aim at increasing access for girls to school but at investing also in improving the quality of education. Often, the data given by countries in international conferences and United Nations sessions regarding achievements regarding the second Millennium Development Goal are merely quantitative. Qualitative indicators on education are scarcely shown. An increase in the rate of literacy does not automatically reflect an improvement in the quality of education.

In order to have a positive impact by educating more girls, it is also important to invest in educating the boys at school on gender issues, because very often we can have very well educated and financially self-sufficient women graduated from school who end up being submissive to ignorant, domineering, rough and alcoholic men.

One entry point that can contribute to change the current mentality, may be supporting the formation of gender-balanced support groups of people living with AIDS in every local community, where women and men can come together, share experiences, frustrations, hopes in living with HIV/AIDS and caring for their beloved ones in the context of HIV/AIDS and confront each other on gender issues. People living with AIDS, when coming into the open, are usually very good ambassadors and opinion leaders at grassroots level.

Another important entry point is the continuous preventive and educational work carried out with those youth by the members of the Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII who share the life within the families' homes, Cicetekelo project and other projects.