

**United Nations , The fifty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women**  
**The role of family in building social and economic security for humanity**

March 2, 2009

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*Summary*

Distinguished guests, ladies and Gentlemen. It is both my pleasure and privilege to speak to you today at this year's 53<sup>rd</sup> Conference at the Status of Women.

I would like to thank the United Federation for Middle East Peace and the Association National AL HIDN, Morocco for sponsoring the event.

How society addresses measures of shared responsibility within the family and measures aimed at reconciling work and family life has significant implications on gender equality. As identified by the Parliamentary Assembly Doc. 11019, we know that women cross-culturally carry most of the responsibility for running the home, raising young children and looking after elderly dependents.

In building economic and social security, strategic efforts have previously identified the significant legal, social and institutional constraints which create barriers:

- Reproductive choice, women's control over their fertility, particularly the number and spacing of their children, and it's relationship to women's status, power and health
- Women's unpaid and underpaid labor as the cause and effect of women's low status and power, and we have identified past mistakes in traditional development efforts, resistance and the extensive effort to bring women into the development process and possibilities for change.
- The impact of globalization in reshaping women's lives worldwide, and of course the impact of internal and international migration patterns.
- Women often have less education to begin with. Not only general literacy, but financial (lack of familiarity with loan procedures), legal (no knowledge of their rights), political illiteracy, which increases their economic vulnerability.
- Women's paid labor generally substantially less—no education no social mobility, relegating women to the proverbial “sticky floor”, thus accept lower paying jobs
- Access to property claims, land rights /land
- Safe Mobility for women
- Social and cultural barriers as conditions of exclusion--predominantly male credit offices or money lenders, women may not be alone—need to be chaperoned—or the distance may not be safe—gender based violence/sexual attacks.

For us as sociologists studying human behavior, we stress the sociological imagination. We all have our individual, specific experiences that shape our thoughts and actions but we must also remember that there are external influences which become part of our thinking and motivation. We are therefore the sum of our culture and our experiences. Although it is not always

comfortable to reflect critically on our assumptions, it is crucial to our dialogue about women and family, and helps us step back from the discriminating ways in which social changes have often been labeled as “westernized”.

In addressing the role of the family, we must understand that gender includes both men and women. It is not a separate effort. Gender is the socially learned behavior and expectations that distinguish the different values society places on masculine and feminine behaviors. These identities are acquired by performing prescribed gender roles.

Standpoints on the family also intersect with political perspectives. There is truth when we say “the personal is political”. Often women are aware of various power relationships in the family, but they consider them personal problems, without seeing them as a systematic part of culture and changing material and social conditions which shape roles and women’s lives. As such, the persistence of cultural and social norms, traditional beliefs and stereotypes has been frequently identified as an obstacle to achieving gender equality. (United Nations. 2001. *From Beijing to Beijing +5: Review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action*, page 30.)

Empowerment is defined as the processes by which women gain greater power over their own lives, both within and outside of the home, and their power to bring about change in situations of gender inequality. Unfortunately, across cultures, social change for women’s empowerment is often discredited by being labeled “feminist” and “anti-family”. It is because it tackles, equal access to the “very important P’s—Power, Privilege, Prestige, Property”. I also compare the P’s to a big “Power Pizza”. Nobody simply gives you a “slice of power”, simply because it would seem the right thing to do. Re-distributing power always comes as a result of successfully challenging the existing status-quo to re-shift deeply embedded power dynamics. It is integral to tackle the cultural roots of these dynamics. Often, individual and intentional acts of dominance over women are the reflections of cultures’ overall systems of power relations. This encompasses personal relationships and naturally labor, occupations, wages, woman’s work, glass ceilings, and stereotypes. In examining women’s role in the family, the cultural variation illustrates how hierarchy is formed and expressed and its political nature because it involves hierarchy, ranking men and women differently in terms of power, wealth and other resources. Thus, this illustrates how gender affects the opportunities and constraints each of us faces throughout our lives.

Our commonalities as women is what creates our bond, our drive and the basis for our dialogues, both in the past, today and in the future—to create actions that extend over multiple nations and addressing the differences from a cultural, “bottom up” approach. Any efforts toward gender equality that fails to understand and appreciate cultural diversity will be a failure. The path to gender equality is shaped by culture and is about women as agents of change, as activists, to instigate action and empowerment that is positive, empowering and promising.

Some cross-cultural similarities:

- Women’s role as “reproducers” is something women share regardless of culture. Bearing and caring for children is a source of status and value for women
- The role of “mother” is for most women a major source of identity and how they define themselves
- Women are also responsible for their children, in ways that men are not. This affects women’s daily lives dramatically, regardless of where they live

- Women equally quite remarkable in carrying on—under conditions of great adversity to keep their families going
- Also another important thing that women have in common is that most women live in patriarchal societies— economic, cultural, political and legal structures that perpetuate gender inequality--defined as a social organization where men have the highest status in the family—wives and children are legally dependent on fathers—decent, inheritance and property ownership predominantly through males
- We have identified this gendered division of labor in line with traditional gender roles, where women and girl assume the lions share responsibility for household, regardless of the rise of economies based on exchange. Stereotypes and gender roles remain, defined as men’s labor yielding money or exchange for goods (hence exchange value) and Women’s labor largely for family use (private value).
- Domestic work—narrowly defines work of women and girls—NOT as a family responsibility to be shared among family members
- This leaves little or no time for education—financial, legal, literacy, political even medical literacy
- Sticky floor and horizontal and vertical workplace segregation
- Expectation of women’s labor to be unconstrained and flexible. Women are expected to adjust their time easily and quickly between market work, paid labor and household production—and the care-giving responsibilities are only exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.
- Thus the invisibility of women’s unremunerated work

The role of the family is pivotal as the most fundamental social institution. How then does the family it becomes problematic? The family is so significant to humanity that it is universal—every human group in the world organizes its members into families. We have the nuclear family, and the extended family, where the family becomes a large kinship network of expected obligations. In industrial and postindustrial societies we have moved more towards the nuclear family.

As sociologists we look towards the functions of family. Functionalists say that the family fulfills the six needs basic for survival: economic production, socialization of children, care of the sick and aged, recreation, sexual control and reproduction. When we however apply the conflict perspective, the key question for this theory being “who benefits from this particular social pattern or social arrangement, at the expense of whom” is when the family becomes problematic— this highlights the familial power dynamics as a major source of conflict, namely over responsibilities for doing housework, taking care of children, financial disputes over spending and earning money, lack of respect and attention, and sex.

This brings us to Economics and labor. The division of gender and identities are quite universally clear in the ways we define “work” and which kinds of work is most valued. Who does what, and what P’s (power, privilege and prestige) it carries. For something to be defined as prestigious, it must be acknowledged as such. This is where stereotypes of femininity interact powerfully with the ideology of public-private to generate rigid patterns in what men and women do. This is how, cross-culturally, hierarchy is formed, expressed and political in nature.

- Universally—greater prestige is given to men’s work—if it is woman’s work it carries less prestige.
- Social arrangements determine what work is assigned to men and women.
- Gender norms—that associate women, the home, and domesticity reinforce the assumption that housework and childcare are women’s work.

The critical issue, as we often address in the division of labor, is not the housework or care giving work *per se* that is dishonorable or discreditable, it is the extremely low prestige that it is awarded. Not symbolically of course, as being a mother and “head of household” but in praxis. That is the carrot –stick effect—because symbolically, it is esteemed the “highest honor” but in actuality an expected, essentialised, stratified and patriarchal. The work women do in the home is often not considered work at all. It is something they do because it is the “natural” thing for women to do. The division of labor along gender lines does not by itself constitute gender inequality, what constitutes social inequality is the fact that greater prestige is given to male activities. Women’s lower status and power aggravated by fact that their work tends to be unpaid or underpaid and are less likely to have control over the things they produce and the wages they receive.

Let us be clear. Women have always worked. Work is a central part of women’s lives all over the world. Worldwide, who does the laundry, shopping, cooking, childcare? In countries where water and fuel must be gathered and families must grow their own food—Women.

A quote I read and enjoyed was by humorist Dave Berry who declares that 85% of men in US are “cleaning impaired”, satirizing the supposed ineptitude or lack of participation in domestic activities on the part of men as “normalized” or “natural”.

So what does this *naturalized* women’s work entail inside and outside the home, that is often commented on with “humorous”? Juxtaposed with a popular conservative argument that *naturalized* in home work duties are put side by side as being *leisure* activities — as though women have enough of that already.

- Purchasing and preparing food (“have fun at the grocery store dear”)
- Taking care of children (“you do it so much better” or “what have you been doing all day”?)
- Laundry (“you know I always mess up the colors”, “did you pick up the dry cleaning”)
- Scheduling children’s activities and appointments (“did you make sure little Johnny did his homework”, did you remember to schedule and take him to the dentist”)
- Scheduling husband and wife activities such as socializing with family friends. (We know that left without woman’s social scheduling, social life would be as fun as a hermit’s dinner party)
- Kin keeping and care-giving  
Recent phenomenon: Boomerang children (children sent off to college, complete their degree but boomerang back home because they find living on their own too expensive)  
The sandwich generation (adults who find themselves “sandwiched”, taking care of their boomerang children as well as taking care of elderly family members at the same time)

- All peripheral and necessary family scheduling (“Did you call my mother”, “did you send out the Christmas cards”, “did you send the gift for my brothers daughters christening”, “did you invite everybody for Eid”)
- Emotional, comforting work to all household members crucial to family functioning (“knee scrapes and coughs, sibling rivalry, family harmony keeper and general bad mood depression fighter”)

Evaluating then all these apparently naturalized tasks for women’s work, there is no wonder then that the notion of “helping” clearly assumes that it is the woman’s responsibility.

Esteemed scholar Barbara Ehrenreich in her book “Maid to Order” , explains the politics of housework in contemporary US society.

- Housework is not degrading because it involves manual labor, but instead it is embedded in degrading relationships that have the potential to reproduce male domination from one generation to the next.
- In US society, the contemporary solution to the housework problem is that you hire “someone else” to do the work—and that someone is most likely from a developing country, or lower social class/status.

What we have seen as a consequence in dual income household US families, and in regards to women performing scholar Arlie Hochschild’s infamous “second shift” in the home—cooking, cleaning, laundry, parenting, homework, etc. once women return home from their “paid employment”. This is akin to the old adage that “something has to give” – meaning there is no such thing as the “supermom”. What *gives* is something from the apparently “naturalized tasks” such as a less tidy home, laundry piling up more often, leaving children in often “sub par” extended hours of childcare facilities, and if not subpar, then expensive childcare facilities (often leaving the mother questioning whether working for low(er) wages which get turned around to childcare are actually a better decision than staying at home in the first place, that lapsing or cutting back on traditional Christmas cards with photos, and buying “pre-packaged” “family-sized” meals offered by corporate food chains, apparently to make life easier for us, when we can pick up a “rotisserie chicken, 2 large sides and six biscuits” on her drive home from work.

Sharing these routine tasks which have been quite clearly all collectively somehow exclusively appointed for women to pick up the slack are crucial for work/life balance and harmony. Let us not wear our traditional and culturally adorned blinders. We are living in a globalized, interdependent world. Yes, and challenging these deeply embedded roles is not an easy task, and rattling the cage of stereotyped labor and gender roles, defining any women’s position in her given culture can only change very slowly. It must be a collaborative effort.

Both men and women are socialized into culture. We have established in the Beijing Declaration, that a more equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women not only provides a better quality of life for women, their daughters and all their children.

In examining the gender perspectives of equal participation of women and men in the household, one very interesting identified characteristic stands out, namely that while we point the finger at men, it is actually the women that stand as the very efficient gate-keepers of patriarchy. How is

this possible we ask? Is there such a thing as gate-keeping patriarchy and discrimination for women? Yes, and these are culturally embedded actions, they begin in childhood and extend to men's adulthood until they are paired with the "suitable bride". These are familial power dynamics. Mothers cosseting their sons way into adulthood (in Italy they call them manones), in Greece, mothers even folding and ironing their adult sons undergarments, waking them with a prepared breakfast and stuffing their pockets with "extra spending money for their night out" for the proverbial "special son". How could a grown man possibly, as the king of his mothers domain, find a suitable "wife" to take over and carry on these duties.

Engrained belief that the son will take care of them, which is quite humorous and paradoxical, often considering the fact that once a man gets married he beckons to the family of the wife—and the one who is really left behind to continue the care into old age for the parents are actually the daughters (or their new daughter in laws). In some countries women also discourage their girl children from challenging traditional gender relations.

How can we change gender stereotypical attitudes and norms to encourage equal sharing and tackle the tradition of men reluctant to take on care, parenting and home duties? Removing the stigma as housework and care giving being a woman's job. (Why of course, because it is necessary, mundane, repetitive, time-consuming and it is much easier to pass the proverbial "hot potato").

It seems easy to say : "Yes, men need to contribute to household sharing "and "care-giving" we must "entice" the men—but what does this mean? The sheer meaning of "entice" in itself becomes problematic. It is much more structural than that. Sharing responsibility cannot simply be a reward. Comments such as "to support and value care" and "liberate women from the confines of care-giving" to "allow women to enable a more active presence in the public sphere" ring hollow and seem to touch upon underlying ,engrained and deeply socialized macho values: Men rule the household as key economic contributors, they do not need another competitor in "their" public sphere anyway, since women's place is in the home.

"Ideally society should value care in all its forms," but it is deeply homogenized as a women's issue. No man wants to be labeled as under the control of a woman. This comes into conflict with culturally rooted feelings of manhood and the reputation maintained amongst friends and in the community. As such, cultural ideals can change-- but very slowly and with a concerted effort that begins in the home. A woman from Greece, who did not consider herself a feminist (with the traditional definition of feminism) told me once "I think it all begins in the home. I want my son to clean his room, as much as I expect my daughter to clean her room. And when I see dirty laundry on my sons floor, I ask him to bring it to the wash room. I tell him that if he doesn't bring his own laundry to the wash room, it will remain dirty. It is as simple as that. I remind him that I am his mother, not his maid." Her comment is a poignant example of the GAD (Gender And Development) approach which recognizes how different people make sense of their lives and derive meaning from their activities and can begin their personal "activism" in the home. For that reason, women as agents of change, not simply recipients of aid.

Three key avenues of action stand out: Beginning with measured activism in the home and family, beginning with raising the children (both boys and girls) with a prevailing attitude of

equality, even when addressing the most routine and simple household chores; sustained and community education programs that invite both men and women to learn about the magnificent impact of financial, legal, health and technological literacy for them, their children and their families; and a concerted media effort addressing or even suggesting a change in stereotypical gender roles. This media effort can encompass PSA (Public Service Announcements), theatre performances, radio and TV shows (like the popular Telenovelas), community theatre performances, etc.

Our dialogue today will address how we can strengthen the commitment from men, address the gender gap and prevailing attitudes and what are the different policy efforts need to “persuade” men, without reinforcing care as something women should do? How do we embark upon transforming patriarchal, machismo values that lead to role gendering and promote women’s inclusion? To strengthen the family and relieve women’s multiple responsibilities that impose both time, energy and emotional constraints to participate in programs designed to increase their education, their incomes, their willingness to adopt new technologies and give women, inside and outside the home, access to the P’s –power, privilege and prestige? I look forward to our important panel today and to collectively share our insights of the the social forces that shape our orientation and view of the world. Through dialogue and critical thinking, we gain a sociological understanding of women and can target the efforts of sustained development as we continue to find solutions, to analyze policies and organizational efforts to determine which ones will both meet short-term practical needs and help change the larger macro structures of women’s and girls’ subordination.

To conclude I end with quotes by Louis L'Amour, “Victory is won not in miles but in inches. Win a little now, hold your ground, and later, win a little more.”

Thank you