

The Family as an Agent for Women's Equality and Human Rights

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Good morning,

The Doha International Family Institute is honored to co-sponsor this event.

As a civil society member, we continue to advocate for making the family a priority issue in policy making at the national and international levels.

The commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the International year of the Family last year provided a wealth of evidence on the centrality of the family and its role in development.

Major civil society organizations and distinguished scholars from around the world participated in the Doha Conference, which was organized by DIFI, in commemoration of the anniversary, and together, we issued the Doha Call to Action.

We called on governments to acknowledge that families are at the center of sustainable development,

And to empower them by implementing specific actions including the integration of a family perspective in policymaking,

Promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and,



Ensuring that the family is made an integral part of the post-2015 development agenda.

Although the Beijing Platform called explicitly for strengthening the role of the family in order to improve the status of the girl child, this objective was not fully implemented.

5 years after Beijing,

World leaders adopted the Millennium Declaration and development agenda, which completely overlooked the role and contribution of the family.

Later, the UN SG in one of his reports acknowledged “the majority of the MDG targets, especially those relating to the reduction of poverty, education of girls and the reduction of maternal mortality, are difficult to attain **unless the strategies to achieve them focused on the family.**”

The time has come to make the family a fundamental part of the new development agenda and not merely an after thought!

Integrating the family in the SDGs will be good for women too.

Creating a favorable environment for the achievement of SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower women and girls) **starts** with acknowledging the role of the family in women’s lives,

By strengthening and protecting the family so that, it will in turn, protect and respect the dignity and rights of women of all ages.

By focusing on strengthening family relationships as a strategy to advance women’s rights.

To strengthen the family, every country needs a robust, comprehensive body of ‘family policies,’



These policies should **explicitly** seek to support the five main functions of the family —

Family formation or dissolution,

Partner relationships,

Economic support,

Child rearing and,

Caregiving.

Many governments tend to focus on women and children's policies in their efforts to strengthen the family.

But, targeting individuals in isolation will not help.

Instead, policies should seek to strengthen **relationships** between family members.

And enable family members to depend on each other,

And be as independent of state intervention as possible

We also believe that to achieve women's equality, national governments need to create synergies between their gender policies and family policies.

They need to apply a family lens to all their actions as well as the gender lens.

The focus of governments on individual based policies stems from the concern that by strengthening the institution of the family,

We risk condoning dysfunctional family relationships, and forcing women and children to remain in violent, abusive or otherwise profoundly unacceptable settings.



Social scientists note that families sometime create their own problems, and sometimes, problems are forced upon them, through the failure of governments, economic crisis, wars and natural disasters and so many other forces and factors,

But in both instances,

It is the family that ultimately, has to face and deal with these problems.

This is why a relational emphasis should be a **golden thread** running through effective family policy,

The relational emphasis should also be used in other areas of policy, specifically, when deciding between various courses of action.

Before you dismiss this completely, let me tell you that recently, the UK government decided to apply a *family test* to all its policies.

If these policies “hurt” families, they will not be implemented.

This is a very important initiative that stemmed from an understanding of the high cost of family breakdown on a country and its social and economic development.

We need to watch the implementation of this initiative and we hope other countries will learn from this experience.

With this mind, I would like to address briefly how the relational emphasis might be used to strengthen the families and women’s equality:

To ensure gender equality, it is important not to lose the relational perspective and become overly focused on the individual rights and needs of men and women.

Starting early, **schools**, for example, should take an interdependency and relational perspective to issues of gender,



By emphasizing the importance of more respectful male female relationships for better, long term family functioning.

This may require challenging negative stereotypes and teaching children and young people that both sexes are of equal worth

Without pitting them against each other,

Say, by demonizing one sex and victimizing the other.

Given the high levels of domestic violence and abuse across the world, approaches that help young people avoid destructive relationships should also be a priority.

By taking a relational and interdependency starting point, governments are would be required, for example to adopt measures to ensure that girls continue to be enrolled in schools throughout their secondary education,

And family laws are reformed so that more equitable relationships can be established within the home.

Men in families

By applying a relational perspective to the role of men in families, we can acknowledge that men are not just sources of income but that they are important in families' landscape of care.

Therefore, policy must address the implications of absent males and particularly fathers for family wellbeing

Whether this absence is involuntary (for example, because of labor migration)

Or voluntary, because of a mix of personal, cultural and economic reasons

We are not saying that by simply occupying the status of a husband or father, men are always indispensable, regardless of how they act,



We are saying that it is vital to recognize the impact of their absence on other generations within the family and,

More positively, the need acknowledge the contribution they can bring to the family.

For instance, there is enough evidence from social research on the influence of fathers on the development of their teenage girls,

Such as the delay of the onset of puberty,

Affirmation of femininity, and,

The development of ethical values and self-esteem

It has been proven that if the father is actively involved in his teenage daughter's life, she will be less likely to engage in premature sexual relations or drop out of school.

Therefore, we recommend the promotion of involved and active fatherhood as the norm from conception and throughout a baby's earliest days and childhood by health, education and family services and through government's parental leave policies.

We strongly recommend moving away from policy that is designed on the assumption that men are unlikely to be safe, and towards an expectation that men can often *bring* safety into families,

This assumption is not only more just but it will also boost men's desire to be a protective factor against harm in children and others' lives.

To break intergenerational cycles of father absence,

It is important to use effective ways to draw and maintain the involvement of young fathers in their children's lives.

It requires emphasizing to young men the potential value to their children of their investment of time, attention and resources.



The last theme, I would like to focus on is family - work balance.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of family – work balance policies,

But still, many countries do not have comprehensive or effective policies in place.

Many countries still do not meet the ILO's minimum standard of maternity leave, which is 14 weeks.

If we apply the relational perspective to national family - work balance policies, where they exist, we will find them to be gender blind.

This is very worrying, especially, when national and organizational cultures and the demands of work make the use of such policies difficult, **especially for men** who are not traditionally seen as care givers within the family.

In turn, this puts more pressure on women to fulfill most, **if not all** caring responsibilities and can lessen their ability to progress in work.

Where these policies do not currently exist, we recommend that national governments stimulate the development of family-friendly policies in the workplace,

While this may require a greater or lesser amount of legislation and/or regulation depending on each country's starting point,

Governments should also play their part in changing cultural norms so that fathers and mothers will both feel able to use them without fearing unpleasant reactions from their employers

This will require articulating an ethic of valuing care as well as productivity

And providing a clear business case for industries that shows how a more accommodating approach to people's family responsibilities can further economic goals.



The new minimum global maternity policy of Vodafone is a case in point. We have been pleasantly surprised by the gift of Vodafone to its female staff on Women's day by offering them at least 16 weeks of fully paid maternity leave,

As well as full pay for a 30-hour week for the first six months after their return to work.

The announcement of Vodafone that it could save up to an estimated \$19 billion annually through the application of this new policy should encourage governments and businesses alike to follow its lead.

Here, I would like to make two comments quickly,

One,

We also need to consider a life course perspective when designing family – work balance policies

Only then does it become clear that, for limited periods, families will often need some flexibility;

A model of (both) parents working full-time is not always and everywhere what people want.

Governments should celebrate the fact that many parents are making a positive choice to look after their children at certain times and do not neglect their preferences for the informal care of other family members or close friends.

And, two,

Achieving women's equality starts by recognizing the importance of women's unpaid work in the family, as wives, mothers, and care givers to children and family members

Beijing Platform called for this recognition.



It is proposed as a target for the achievement of SDG 5.

We can start by standing up against the attempts to cast this role as a negative stereotype that should be “modified” or “eliminated.”

The choice of the millions of women around the world to opt out of formal employment and dedicate their full time to their families should be respected.

To sum up, governments should strengthen family relationships as a strategy to speed up gender equality and they should create synergies between their gender and family policies.

Thank you for listening.