

UN Event on the Role of the Family, Fathers and Family-Oriented Social Policy

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New York, United States—On February 11, 2016, UPF and several other NGOs co-sponsored a Commission on Social Development (CSocD) side event with the Permanent Mission of Qatar at the United Nations.

The program, entitled “The Role of the Family in Strengthening Social Development,” held a special focus on the well-being of children. The moderator, Lynn Walsh, director of UPF’s Office of the Family, introduced the session by explaining the need to raise the profile of family issues at the UN and in society at large, especially the unique responsibility that parents have for the well-being of their children. The speakers at the event, she

said, would explore not only the macro level of global trends and policies but also the micro level of the essential, intimate mother-father-child relationship which, from national policies to UN targets, deserves utmost protection and support.

The program opened with remarks from Ms. Al-Anoud Al-Temimi, third secretary and third committee expert in the Qatari Permanent Mission in New York, representing Qatari Ambassador Ms. Alya Ahmed Saif Al-Thani. Ms. Al-Anoud called the audience’s attention to the stability that parents and a strong family bring to children and consequently to society. Sustainable development is dependent on educating children and recognizing that parents are the primary educators. Ms. Al-Anoud asserted: “Safe, healthy and well-educated children are the foundations of a thriving and equitable society. Societies can only develop in a sustainable manner if the basic needs and rights of children, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable, are met. And safe and sustainable families are, in turn, essential for children.”

Addressing the stark realities of violence against children, Ms. Al-Anoud pointed out that nearly "1 billion children under 15 suffer regular physical punishment, and nearly a quarter of all girls between the ages of 15 and 19 report experiencing physical violence. Violence against children affects every country and every community." This violence, though often unseen, greatly undermines the well-being of children and prohibits social development in an expanse of areas.

Parents naturally care the most about their children's well-being and future and invest themselves for the sake of their children, Ms. Al-Anoud said. The family is the primary unit to protect children to enable a productive developmental pathway. She beautifully stated, "The protection of children is a key component of the 2030 agenda– and is a sine qua non for just and sustainable future development." She concluded that progress in sustainable development is possible only through investing effectively in children and consequently in the family.

The next speaker was Kyle Pruett, MD, clinical professor of child psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine. His presentation, entitled “Fathers’ Impact on Children: Consequences for Social Development,” was rich in research showing the differences between the parenting of mothers and fathers across the life span of the child. Fathers more typically are playful, stimulating and unpredictable and more fun for a child. In contrast, the mother tends to be comforting, calming and regulating. Fathers' method of relating and disciplining prepares the child for dealing with challenges of the real world, while mothers build children's skills for relationships. Research indicates that children with involved fathers benefit emotionally, behaviorally and academically.

Research also shows that fathering changes men neurologically. This results in increased bonding and sensitivity, as well as longer-lasting marriage and even longer life. However, the relationship between the mother and father itself is important. Some mothers' "gate-keeping" discourages or prevents fathers' involvement, which is detrimental for children. Studies show that building the co-parent relationship decreases harsh parenting, anxiety and depression in parents, and violent problem-solving and behavioral problems in children. Mother-father cooperation leads to increases in income, paternal engagement, parental satisfaction, and children's academic performance.

In conclusion, Dr. Pruett said, "Given the incontrovertible evidence that fathers affect families," it is imperative that policies and programs become father-friendly, engaging fathers and building the invaluable strengths of co-parenting, complementarity and cooperation between the mother and father. Dr. Pruett stated, "Mothers can't father, and fathers can't mother. But children do best with both parents."

The next presentation, "Strengthening Families for Sustainable Social Development," was given by Bahira Sherif Trask, PhD, professor and chair, College of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Delaware. Dr. Trask described the growing conflict around work-family balance and the caretaking of children, disabled and elderly which is undermining family stability in all contexts around the world. States have a large stake in the welfare of families, because when families are unable to provide for their children and for the most dependent, the market and government need to fill in but at a very expensive cost. For example, without families caring for their loved ones in the United States, it would cost the government around \$306 billion.

Unfortunately the family has become politicized. One factor is the strong influence of feminism, which in Western countries has ignored many realities such as young people's retreat from marriage and the decline in birthrates and, in non-Western countries, has downplayed the very real dependence on the family as the primary source of security and social capital. There have been many efforts to replace the family in raising children, such as with the kibbutzim in Israel, but all have failed miserably. It is fairly well recognized that the family provides for the economic and social needs of its members. But families also remain primary for reproduction, early education and socializing the next generation and for stabilizing adult development.

In terms of policies to strengthen families, Dr. Trask cautioned that we cannot assume that approaches in one context have the same impact on the family in another context. She added, "It is not one-size-fits-all." For instance, when providing childcare we need to ask what is best for children. Children from disadvantaged homes often fare better and get more stimulation when in quality childcare. However, children from educated, stable homes when placed in childcare actually fare worse, because they are denied quality stimulation and care from their parents. In reality, the quality of childcare is critical.

Dr. Trask recommended that more attention be given to preventing poverty and said that more provisions are needed to improve early childhood and secondary education for disadvantaged families. The family would gain in stability with an increase in maternal leave, childcare, flexible work hours and greater involvement with fathers. Overall, families would be strengthened if family well-being were better understood as not just a private concern. The welfare of the family and children is also clearly a public and governmental responsibility.

The co-sponsors for this event were the UN NGO Committee on the Family, International Council of Psychologists, Universal Peace Federation, LDS Charities, and Alliance Defending Freedom International. Questions and answers followed the presentations.