

FAITH DOING JUSTICE NEWSLETTER Editorial, March 2009

SHARING RESPONSIBILITY & CARE

Caring for sick, elderly or disabled people has become a global industry with a feminised workforce. What happens to us when we try to marketise and outsource solidarity and respect for human dignity?

One of our news items, and the featured quote this month, draw attention to a recent intervention made by the Holy See's Delegation to the United Nations' Economic and Social Council at a session held to follow up the Fourth World Conference on Women and the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". Its theme was the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS.

No matter who we are or what our socio-economic status might be, we all need others, and any one of us might find ourselves in need of care. We are interdependent, that is, we depend on each other.

Can we really 'delegate' a commitment to protecting and promoting the wellbeing of others to the female half of humanity, or to members of poor nations, or to those who have few marketable skills? To do so flies in the face of the principle of solidarity, which reminds us that we are all really responsible for each other, and encourages us to imagine ourselves in the place of others. The very humanity of those who are thus 'excused' from caring is diminished.

The human dignity of those who provide care is also disrespected when their important work is systematically undervalued both socially and economically.

And what are we saying about the value and worth of those who are sick or elderly or disabled when we accord the work of caring for them a low status and are reluctant to pay a decent wage to those who undertake it?

Our Catholic hospitals and aged care facilities know well that care-giving is about so much more than a market for services. You can pay someone to dress a wound, but you can't buy a smile – and real friendship is priceless.

A gendered division of labour and the international divide between rich and poor countries converge in the experience of migrant women care workers. Women from poor countries are working around the globe caring for the sick, elderly or disabled members of richer families and nations. They are poorly paid and frequently exploited. The HIV/AIDS crisis has led to an exponential growth in the need for care-giving in some communities, while longer life expectancy and ageing populations raise the issue in others.

A re-evaluation of the sharing of responsibility and the value of care-giving is urgent and important.

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