

Work and Family Reconciliation

An ILO Approach to Decent Work and Poverty Reduction

Briefing Paper prepared for the Doha Forum on Decent Work and Poverty 25-26 October, 2011

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1. ILO Standards on Work and Family

The Decent Work agenda is an integrated platform for action that calls for the active buy-in and participation of all the partners in society. The ILO notion of Decent Work is based on the fundamental understanding that “labour is not a commodity” and that employment is an instrument to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are equitably distributed in society, thus guaranteeing social peace and sustainable economies.

.... all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity”.

Declaration of Philadelphia

The effective realization of such agenda requires a close consideration of the inter-linkages between the productive capacities of individuals and their need to adequately care for their families’ material and non-material welfare. The consideration of the relations between work and family has been a concern for the International Labour Conference since its first session, with the adoption of the Maternity Protection Convention (No. 3). A number of important instruments promoting gender equality have been adopted by the Conference since then. The adoption of the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156), and the Workers with Family Responsibilities Recommendation, 1981 (No. 165), has an historical significance in that it recognized the role of both men and women in reconciling work and family responsibilities.

Convention No. 156 reads as follows:

“With a view to creating effective equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women workers, each Member [State] shall make it an aim of national policy to enable persons with family responsibilities who are engaged or wish to engage in employment to exercise their right to do so without being subject to discrimination and, to the extent possible, without conflict between their employment and family responsibilities”

(Article 3, paragraph 1)

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979 (CEDAW) also recognizes the importance of sharing family responsibilities between women and men. These international instruments marked the recognition that gender inequality is deeply intertwined with the gender division of productive and reproductive work and that both women and men need support for their roles in the world of work and in the family.

Unpaid family responsibilities: a definition

In Convention No.156, “family responsibilities” refers specifically to responsibilities in relation to “dependent children” and “other members of the immediate family who clearly need their care or support” (Art.1), such as children, elderly, disabled or sick people. It is up to each country to define which persons would be covered by these terms, since the notions of “family” and “family responsibilities” can take different meanings in different societies and cultures. The Convention clearly includes dependent sick or elderly as well as children.

2. Recent trends, and their impact on the work-family agenda

Since the Convention was adopted in 1981, the tensions between work and family responsibilities have become more and more urgent in the policy agenda. Changes in the

world of work and in family structures have occurred, which are now putting more and more pressure on families to find a balance between their family responsibilities and their economic activities:

2.1. More women in paid employment, still too many in poor quality jobs

Labour markets and policies promoting decent work—productive work in conditions of freedom, equity and security for both women and men—play key roles in reducing poverty and inequality around the world.

Over the last 50 years, women's participation in paid employment outside the home has been increasing consistently and significantly in almost all countries. Such increase has been the result of concurrent factors, such as improved educational and economic opportunities, but also on an increased need for income in households. Increasingly, both members of a couple are employed outside the home. The number of single-parent, female headed households has also grown.

However, women's participation in the labour market is still limited and a large share of it is concentrated in low-quality employment. Women who do find work are often confined to work in the less productive sectors of economies and in occupational groups that are less likely to meet the characteristics that define decent work, including access to social protection, basic rights and representation at work. Also, as a result of the sector and status of their work, women often earn less than men. Ten years ago agriculture was still the main employer for women. Today, the services sector now provides the majority of female jobs, but women's share as contributing family workers and own-account workers remains much larger than men's, especially in the world's poorest regions.

2.2. More care needs, but less family support

The demands related to family care have intensified. In both developed and developing countries, traditional family support for care has become less available: urbanization, internal and international migration, changes in family structures, and women's increased labour force participation have made it more difficult for families to rely on traditional family support networks.

In many societies, health epidemics such as HIV/AIDS have placed greater caregiving demands on families, especially women and girls, at times when additional income is needed for medical expenses and to compensate for the eventual loss of the income of the infected family member. Death and illness of persons of working age increases the social burden on families and the need to access adequate basic services such as water and electricity. In poor families, the time spent in caring for the sick, including fetching water, is time taken away from other activities such as growing vegetable garden, processing food or other subsistence activities. Girls are even more exposed to domestic child labour.

In industrialized countries, population ageing societies has increased the number of elderly requiring care. Globally, the number of older persons is expected to exceed the number of children for the first time ever in 2047.

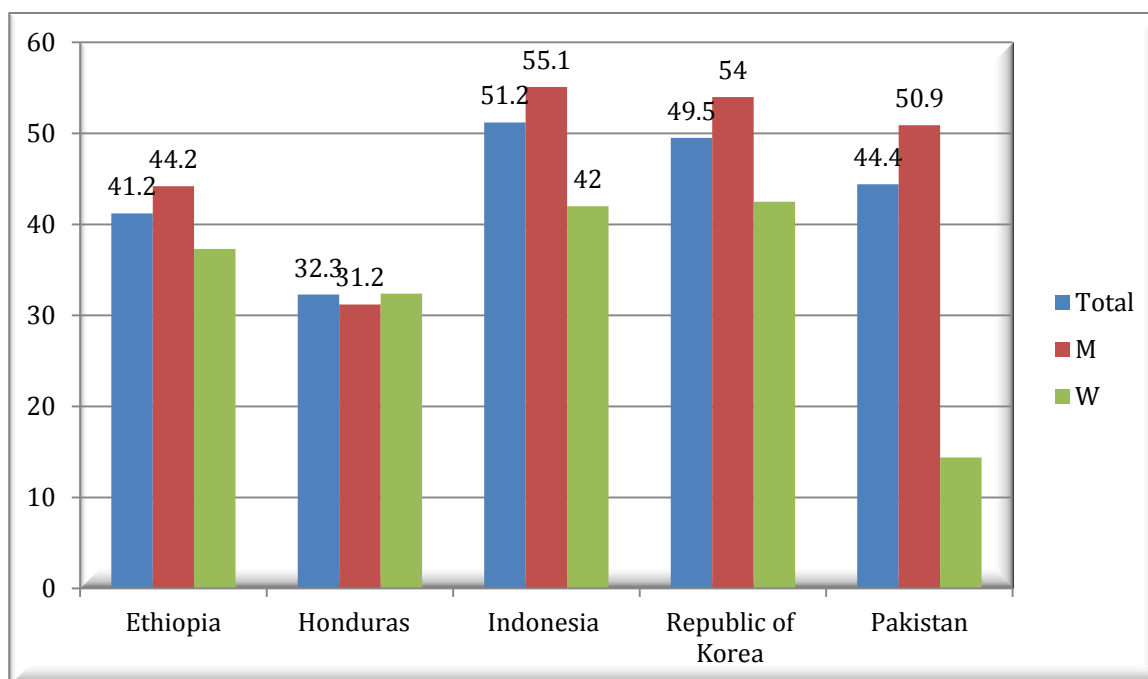
2.3. Longer working hours: paid and unpaid

Enterprises face increasingly competitive business environments and the pressures of global markets. These realities include precarious work arrangements, low wages, long working hours, the densification of working time – leaving hardly any unproductive time during working hours – and unpredictable demands for overtime.

ILO global estimates indicate that about one in five – 22 per cent, or 614.2 million – workers around the world are working more than 48 hours per week. The share of men and women putting in excessive working time is particularly important in a number of countries, where more than 30 per cent of all employees are reported to work more than 48 hours per week, such as shown in the following graph ²

Figure 1. Percentage of employees working more than 38 hours per week, selected countries

² Lee, S., D. McCann and J.C. Messenger, 2007, op.cit.



Working conditions that demand long hours in paid work undermine both men's and women's capacities to provide the care required at home, intensifying conflict between economic and care responsibilities. Men's participation in family responsibilities has not correspondingly increased, at least in part because of traditional gender roles and stereotypes combined with the pressures of paid work.

Despite women's increased participation in the labour market, their share of family responsibilities has not diminished. In every society, women tend to spend far more hours in unpaid work than men do. Time use studies around the world show that women spend considerably more time than men in unpaid tasks related to caring for children and elders, cooking, cleaning, etc.³ For example, women in Bolivia spend 35 hours in unpaid work per week compared to 9 hours for men. In contrast, men typically spend more hours in paid economic activities than women—in the case of Bolivia, men spend 42 weekly hours in paid work compared to women's 26. However, when hours in paid and unpaid work are summed together, women tend to have longer work weeks than men and less time for leisure or sleep.

Unpaid family responsibilities influence whether women can take work, work, what type of work, for how long, and where. Women's availability for paid economic activities is strongly

³ For EU data, showing a persisting imbalance in sharing domestic work responsibilities among women and men, see EUROSTAT (2006) How is the time of Women and men distributed in Europe?

dependent on the fact that they have to spend long hours in unpaid family work. For example, in Latin America, over half of all non-employed women aged 20 to 24 cite their unpaid household work as the main reason they do not seek paid employment.⁴

In industrialized countries, these patterns are clearly visible in the lower labour force participation rates and higher part-time employment rates of women with young children.⁵ In developing countries, there has been less research or policy dialogue on the relationship between workers family responsibilities and paid work.

The informal economy is a major source of employment for men and women in many developing countries. In general, informal employment is a larger source of employment for women than for men, and within the informal economy, women tend to be clustered in the most precarious and poorly remunerated forms of work. The reasons for informal economic activity are multifaceted and complex, but it is clear that for many women, the lack of public and private support for family responsibilities means that the informal economy may offer the only paid work that provides enough flexibility, autonomy, and geographic proximity to home to allow them to combine paid economic activity with family responsibilities. For example, in the Philippines, where more than two-thirds of all women work in the informal economy, 20 percent of women cited family responsibilities as the reason they turned to informal rather than formal employment.⁶

2.4. More time to move from home to work

The increase in traffic congestion that characterized most cities, the scarcer availability of employment opportunities, insufficient public transport policies contribute to this phenomenon, which has a particularly negative impact on low-income families.

For women, transport can be more difficult than for men, and travel time is often longer. Transport policies often reflect the needs of the “ideal worker” and do not give much attention to providing safe and quick ways to access social services such as health centres and schools.

⁴ Cassirer N. and Addati L. (2008), Addati, L. and N. Cassirer, 2008. Equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS, prepared for the Expert Group Meeting of UN Commission on the Status of Women, Equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS, 6-8 October 2008 (Geneva).

⁵ See for instance EUROSTAT (2009), Reconciliation between work, private and family life in the European Union

⁶ 8 Vercelles, N.A. and S.N. Beltran (2004): Reconciling work and family. Philippine Country Study, Unpublished Working Paper, Conditions of Work and Employment Programme, (Geneva, ILO).

Public transport can be unsafe for women and they also may have mobility constraints due to social and cultural rules.

2.5. Less adequate social policies and services

Convention n. 156 (1981) and Recommendation n. 165 on workers with Family responsibilities call upon Member States to taken measure to “*develop or promote “to develop or promote community services, public or private, such as child-care and family services and facilities (Article 5). “*

However, childcare and health care support for sick people to meet the needs of working parents is a policy priority in relatively few countries. In many countries, strong traditional views persist that care giving is the responsibility of the mother, to be dealt with privately with the assistance of their extended families or domestic workers.

Social policies and services to support family responsibilities, and workplace policies to support work-family balance, have not kept pace with the changes in labour markets and families. In addition, in response to economic crises, many countries have embarked upon cuts in public service provision, increasing women’s time poverty and placing even greater demands on women and girls to provide unpaid care.

Childcare services for children under three are not formally provided for in more than half of the world countries. Programmes for pre-school age children are more frequently found. Large differences in quantity and quality of services provision exist among rural and urban areas. Frequently, existing services are mostly planned in ways which are not easy to reconcile with the times and demands of workplaces (for instance the length of school holidays, lunch breaks during the school day).

Tensions between work and family are likely to worsen in the present crisis. Past experience demonstrates that financial downturns tend to hit women harder than men, because pre-crisis gender inequality in the home and in the labour market place women in already vulnerable positions. Women’s lower employment rates, weaker control over property and resources, concentration in informal and vulnerable forms of employment with lower earnings, and less social protection all place women in a weaker position than men to weather crises.

3. Individual responses: coping strategies

In absence of adequate policies, workers and families find themselves caught in the dilemma between “time and money”.

The current trends in workplaces and in families lead to considerable conflicts and stress for workers and their families, to which they respond with “individual coping strategies” which, however, do not come without a cost.

3.1. Domestic workers

The purchase of care services has been an important solution for millions of families in middle income groups.. Domestic work and employment in care services has greatly expanded in many societies, thus providing a source of employment for large numbers of rural and migrant women. Bu the solution comes with its own problems as domestic work very rarely is performed under conditions that can be called of “Decent Work”. Most workers providing care services are women, and their professions and the skills involved tend to be undervalued and underpaid, mirroring the value and recognition of unpaid care work.

Hiring domestic workers is a common solution for many families trying to cope with work and family demands in the absence of collective policies and services. Domestic work provides millions of jobs, mostly for women, throughout the world, in countries at all levels of development. Domestic work is looked upon as unskilled because most women have traditionally been considered capable of doing the work, and the skills they are taught by other women in the home are perceived to be natural. When paid, therefore, it remains undervalued and poorly regulated. The poor pay and conditions of domestic work undermine the goals of equal opportunity and treatment in the labour market on the basis of sex, as well as race, ethnicity, national or social origin, and other dimensions.⁷

3.2. Who else carries the burden?

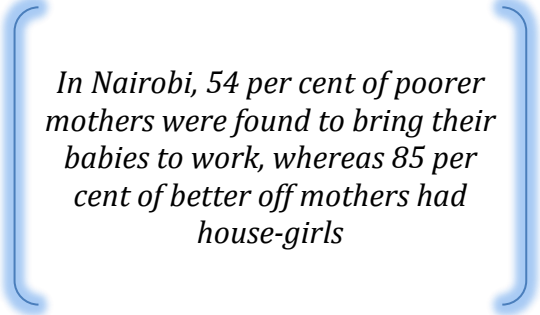
Facing insufficient income to pay for childcare and lacking traditional support, families may be obliged to resort to inadequate solutions, such as leaving children alone at home, taking an older child out of school or bringing the child to work where the environment may be unhealthy or dangerous. For example, in Indonesia, 40 per cent of working women care for their children while working.

⁷ The adoption of Convention No. 189 by the 2011 International Labour Conferences opens new avenues in this respect.

This is particularly true for women working in vulnerable jobs, which means that often children are placed in hazardous workplaces, uncovered by social protection provisions. Children in the workplace learn to work and may gradually take on the job as they grow, instead of going to school.

Poor households tend to be particularly vulnerable because there is **a clear link between income poverty and time poverty**. Poor families have fewer opportunities to use time-saving technology, they need to spend longer hours in processing foods, and they cannot buy services (care, domestic help) to lighten their care burden. Women in these families spend extremely long hours in both paid and unpaid work and remain trapped in the vicious circle of low productivity. Poor households may therefore need to rely on the time of their girl children to take care of family duties and domestic tasks, pushing them into unpaid child domestic work.

The informal economy is a major source of employment for men and women in many developing countries. In general, informal employment is a larger source of employment for women than for men, and within the informal economy, women tend to be clustered in the most precarious and poorly remunerated forms of informal work. The reasons for informal economic activity are multifaceted and complex but at least part of the explanation for women's preponderance among the most vulnerable workers lies in the fact that it offers



In Nairobi, 54 per cent of poorer mothers were found to bring their babies to work, whereas 85 per cent of better off mothers had house-girls

better ways to for poor women to cope with the burden of unpaid family responsibilities. For example, 40 percent of mothers working informally in the slums of Guatemala City were caring for their children themselves, with lack of childcare cited as a key reason for not taking formal economy jobs where children could not

accompany them.

3.3. Reinforcing labour market vulnerability

Lack of affordable care and convenient family support services can turn family responsibilities in a disadvantage and a ground for discrimination. Convention No. 156 recognizes that both women and men can be disadvantaged because of family responsibilities. However, women continue to be the main provider of family care: the tension between the requirements of traditional work places, organized on the basis on notion of availability of an “ideal male worker” anywhere and anytime, and the demands of unpaid work remain a major source of women’s disadvantage in the world of work.

When family support services (e.g. childcare) are not available, women in dual-earner families tend to limit or withdraw their labour force participation while men continue to perform as the “ideal worker”. Assumptions about men’s main breadwinners’ ambitions and expectations at work and women’s role within the family make it more socially acceptable for men to work long hours. Women will tend to concentrate on working modalities that are more compatible with family responsibilities, such as part-time work, self-employment, and home work. They may withdraw from the labour market, with subsequent difficulties in re-entering, or negative impacts on their future social protection or wage prospects.

The fact of having to meet family responsibilities can become a source of conflict within workplaces, too. Dealing with family emergencies — such as a sick child or parent — can lead to absenteeism, potential pay losses and even dismissal.

In addition, stereotypical ideas of women’s commitment, ambitions, mobility or time availability as linked to role of primary family care-giver may give grounds to unjustified and discriminatory behaviours from employers.ⁱ In most countries, this means decreased career prospects or higher obstacles in accessing paid and good quality employment. The conflict is particularly serious when it affects single-parents – most of them women - who must provide care and at the same time secure an income for the family.

On the other hand, in some countries such as the EU or the US, men are starting to put the “long hours working culture” under discussion, and claim their right to share family responsibilities in a more balanced and equitable way.

4. Impact on workplace productivity

The negative impact expands to workplaces and companies, too.. Problems such as employee turnover and difficulties in recruiting appropriate personnel may be related to the incompatibility of working conditions with family responsibilities.

Absenteeism, tardiness, decreased productivity may be the result of work-family tensions. The stress on staff with family responsibilities may be affecting their concentration and productivity. The costs of these problems have often not been assessed in relation to the costs of adopting more family-friendly arrangements. In fact, there is a growing body of evidence that family-friendly work-place policies have positive returns on companies' performance. Research suggests that many enterprises are just unaware of the business benefits that can be acquired by adopting family-friendly workplace measures.

In the informal economy, family responsibilities have a direct impact on women's productive potential and capacity to access services that could help them emerge out of informality or better develop their entrepreneurial skills (mobility, training, credit ...).

5. Longer-term impact on society

By constraining possibilities for income generation, family responsibilities can perpetuate poverty, particularly among groups at poverty risk such as female-led households. Dependent children, the elderly and others in need may not receive adequate care; they impact can be particularly severe on small children in terms of health, education, personal development and future opportunities to break the circle of poverty.

An inefficient use of women's economic potential and their being confined in low productivity jobs stifles the capacity of labour markets to respond to global challenges. In countries which have invested in women's education, the waste is even higher as women's human capital, talent and skills are not appropriately used.

A dramatic drop in fertility rate is another negative effect recorded in countries where women's entry in the labour market is not supported by integrated work-family conciliation

policies. This is a serious concern for industrialized countries facing a skills-gap and the needs of an ageing populations. Countries which have invested in such type of measures (e.g. Sweden) seem to be better prepared to face the problem.

6. Policy responses: an overview

Reducing inequalities between men and women in the labour market and at home is a key objective by itself, but also a pre-condition to progress towards the elimination of poverty. To achieve these aims, it is necessary to recognize the extent to which family responsibilities and unpaid family work impact on the ability of individual and of families to contribute to the economy and to ensure decent living conditions for all their members, particularly children.

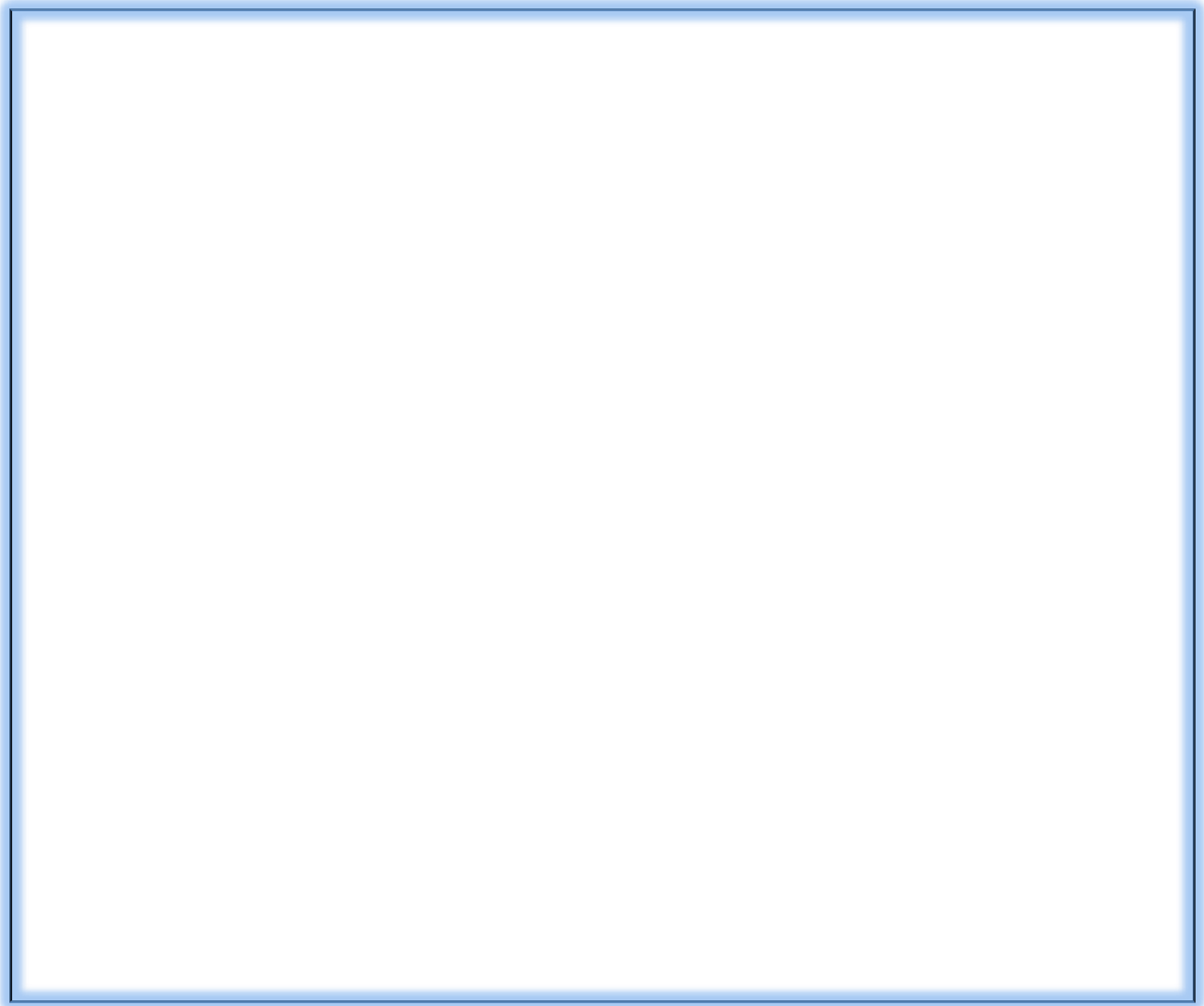
Evidence shows that work-family policies are indispensable to achieving decent and productive work and key to the attainment of equal opportunity and treatment for men and women at work. To this end, an increasing number of legislative and practical measures have been adopted to achieve a work and family balance. Yet, as the ILO supervisory bodies have observed, relatively few governments have set up comprehensive policy frameworks in line with Convention No. 156 and unpaid family responsibilities continue to undermine the achievement of decent work and gender equality objectives.

Developing integrated work-family policies is not just a matter of providing support to individual workers and their families; it is a matter of public interest, because the work-family conflict affects the social and economic development of the whole society.

Governments, as well as employers, trade unions and the public, at large, are increasingly realizing that many families are having difficulties balancing work and care needs of their dependents. In particular, parents' ability to work and work productively is being limited by the lack of sound work-family measures while many children, elderly, sick and disabled are being affected by the lack of quality care. Particularly during crises, efforts to preserve basic services, especially in health and education, and to retain community support structures are particularly important for reducing women's workloads, safeguarding girls' opportunities for education, and creating conditions conducive to gender equality.

Policies and measures by governments and social partners to help workers reconcile work and family can make a difference. Work-family measures can be taken at the national, community and workplace levels and are intended to make family responsibilities more compatible with paid work and to make working conditions more compatible with unpaid family responsibilities. It is necessary to advance toward reconciliation of these two spheres through *redistributing care responsibilities between men and women, as well as among the family, the State, the market and society as a whole.*

Government has a leadership role to play in setting policy orientation and creating a social climate that is conducive to dialogue and change for improving work–family reconciliation. Comprehensive work-family policies are an essential aspect of quality working life and have to become a key component of employment and social national strategies aimed at achieving gender equality and decent work.



Work-family conciliation covers a broad set of policy areas. We here summarize the key areas provided for by Convention No. 156

6.1. Policy research

Labour market surveys, demographic surveys population censuses, household budget surveys and time-use surveys should provide statistical information on current trends, including on non-market activities (unpaid work) which however are indispensable to societies.

Other areas of research can aim to identify work-family conciliation needs, the nature of work-family conflicts and how families are coping, working conditions, use and need of care facilities, workers and employers' ideas about solutions.

6.2. Labour legislation and social security benefits related to leave and working time

Two main sets of regulations and policies can directly benefit work-family balance:

- Working time provisions. This includes the: regulation of normal working time, overtime and part-time work and which comprise measures to make the workplace more responsible to the needs of families, whilst increasing productivity. It can cover the re-design of working hours to match school hours or care services, addressing the problems of asocial working hours or shifts swapping, providing flexibility in working times and location (telework). A very important element is the attention to promoting equality of working conditions and career prospects among part-time and full-time workers, as well as to the disadvantages linked with some forms of teleworking arrangements.
- Leave entitlements (annual leave, sick leave, maternity leave and other forms of family-related leave, such as paternity, parental and care-givers' and other emergency leave). Childcare leave entitlement has undergone many changes over the last decades. Maternity leave, covered by the ILO Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183), gives the mother the right to a period of rest in relation to childbirth, with cash and medical benefits, employment security and non-discrimination, health protection and right to breastfeed. More recently, there has been a move towards encouraging fathers to take up care-related leave through the introduction of paternity leave (short leave immediately after child-birth) or modifying parental leave, making it available to both parents. These leave entitlements can be paid or unpaid and many different formula are used in different parts of the world.

Large proportions of working parents do not have access to these entitlements and take-up rates show that mothers everywhere continue to take more leave than fathers. The gender wage gap is an important element contributing to this stereotype as women continue to earn less than men. Experience shows that parental leave can only

be an acceptable solution when it is paid and when fathers and mothers taking this leave do not have to be afraid of losing their jobs or receiving an unfavourable reassignment after the leave. In order not to increase the gender inequalities and women's loss of employable skills, a policy needs to be in place to support parents, still mostly women, re-entering employment after a leave period for family reasons.

6.3. Measures to encourage the provision of care services

Among all work-family measures, the development of affordable, reliable and quality social care services, to ease the conflict between work and caring for young, older and sick relatives, has been broadly recognized among the most cost-effective and gender-sensitive solutions to support the needs of workers with family responsibilities.

Governments take different approaches in relation to childcare provision. Public service provision – as in Nordic countries - is certainly difficult to put in place for many countries. However experiences have shown that there are less costly and still effective ways in which the issue can be strategically tackled, through partnerships with NGOS, private sector, local administrations, enterprises themselves, the unions and other actors in civil society. In particular, ILO research on childcare for working parents has found that the external benefits related to these measures accruing to society, employers, workers and their families, are numerous. Childcare, in particular, is a particularly important strategy in efforts to reduce poverty and women's work in the informal economy. In particular: t⁸

- Helps prevent the perpetuation of social inequalities and intergenerational poverty, strengthening families' social and economic security and reducing their vulnerability to risk.
- Facilitates the smooth and efficient functioning of labour markets, through the full utilization of society's growing investment in women's education and a diversified labour force.
- Provides a stronger start for disadvantaged children, enhancing their physical well-being, cognitive and language skills, and social and emotional development.
- Contributes to job creation in the service sector to replace some of the unpaid household work.

⁸ Hein C. and N. Cassirer, 2009. Workplace solutions for Childcaer, (2010) (ILO, Geneva).

- Increases tax revenues since higher participation rates and earnings of parents increase national production.
- Reduces public expenditure on welfare and in the longer term, on remedial education and crime.
- Supports the promotion of gender equality

6.4. Lightening the burden

This broad policy area, transcends the scope of labour legislation and looks at the broader environment which shapes the quality of working life of women and men. It implies re-thinking public policies keeping in mind the specificities of the work –family agenda and can comprise complex tasks such improving national capacities of health care services to alleviate current demands on women and girls, or increased public investments in infrastructure and public services (including transportation, water and energy supply, health services, childcare and other family and community services). On the other hand, it can refer to less visible, less costly but equally important areas of action, such as improving the organization and timing of public service provision, to meet the need of workers with family responsibilities: opening hours of schools, government services , health care centres, public transportation, spatial planning (decentralization of services), use of technology for government service provision. The reduction of time spent in domestic chores is also an important area of action, particularly in areas with difficult access to basic services such as water, sanitation, energy.

6.5. Facilitating entry into the labour force

Many countries pursue active labour market policies in order to help people back into employment after they have dropped out of the labour force, or to help them return to work after periods of unemployment. These policies are essentially for ensuring that family responsibilities do not undermine men’s and women’s possibilities for paid work and to promote broader conditions for equality in both paid and unpaid work. Active labour market policies have a long tradition in countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Germany and are more or less systematically pursued today in all EU Member States. Evaluations suggest that active labour market measures are likely to be most effective in (re)integrating people into employment when they are part of a package of mutually supportive services that may include remedial education, job training, job search assistance and direct provision of work experience. An example of such an approach is the programme “Women and Employment” in

Switzerland, which is directed specifically at supporting with training and job-search services women wishing to rejoin the labour force.

6.6. Communication and information,

This includes awareness raising campaigns to sensitize men and women on the need to re-think the value of unpaid care work and look at work–family balance as a matter of co-responsibility among women and men, and all other actors in society.

6.7. Promotion of social dialogue and tripartite participation

Governments and social partners can work together to promote change and support workplace measures. Governments in various countries have been active in showing for the benefits of work-family measures at workplace levels , for both businesses and workers. Workers have been advocating for improvements in national legislations, introducing work and family issues in collective bargaining agendas and informing workers of their rights. Individual employer initiatives also exist to this end, such as Employers' Awards and Certificates, in the growing recognition of the business benefits of family and gender equality friendly company policies.

Annex - Selected ILO publications on Work and Family

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*For more information on ILO research and policy advice activities on work and family:
Conditions of Work and Employment Programme (TRAVAIL) – www.ilo.org/travail
Bureau for Gender Equality - www.ilo.org/gender*

*For more information on ILO training and on-line learning activities:
International Training Centre of the ILO , Gender and non-Discrimination Programme
www.itcilo.org/gender*

ⁱ Stereotypical assumptions about women's availability have been found to override the recognition of women's skills and talents in many discrimination cases worldwide.