



Work and family responsibilities: What are the problems?

Families need the financial resources that come from work to provide for members. At the same time, families must ensure that dependents, such as children or the elderly, are looked after during working hours. Recent trends in both the labour market and the family are making it increasingly difficult for families as they are caught in a “time-money squeeze” between family-caring responsibilities and the demands of work.

Measures at the national, community

and workplace levels can have a major impact on the extent of the conflicts and pressures experienced by workers and potential workers with family responsibilities. This Information Sheet provides a brief overview of the problems resulting from work-family conflicts in order to highlight the need for governments and the social partners to pay increasing attention to policies and measures to help reduce the conflict and to consider the possibility of ratifying the Convention on Workers with Family Responsibilities.

The Convention on Workers with Family Responsibilities (No. 156, 1981)

Article 3, paragraph 1, 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.

What are family responsibilities?

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”. It is up to each country to define which persons would be covered by these terms,

given that the notions of “family” and “family obligations” can take many forms in different societies and contexts. But the Convention clearly includes dependent sick or elderly as well as children. Domestic work in the household would be considered as part of family responsibilities.

A historical perspective

A historical perspective is useful for understanding why the conflict between work and family responsibilities has become a problem for many families in the second half of the twentieth century.

Work moves outside the home

Historically, most societies were agricultural with both men and women working near home. With the Industrial Revolution, work moved outside the home. Initially, men and women (as well as children) were involved in factory and mine work, but women gradually withdrew as part of the struggle for a “family wage” and the ideal that women should not need to

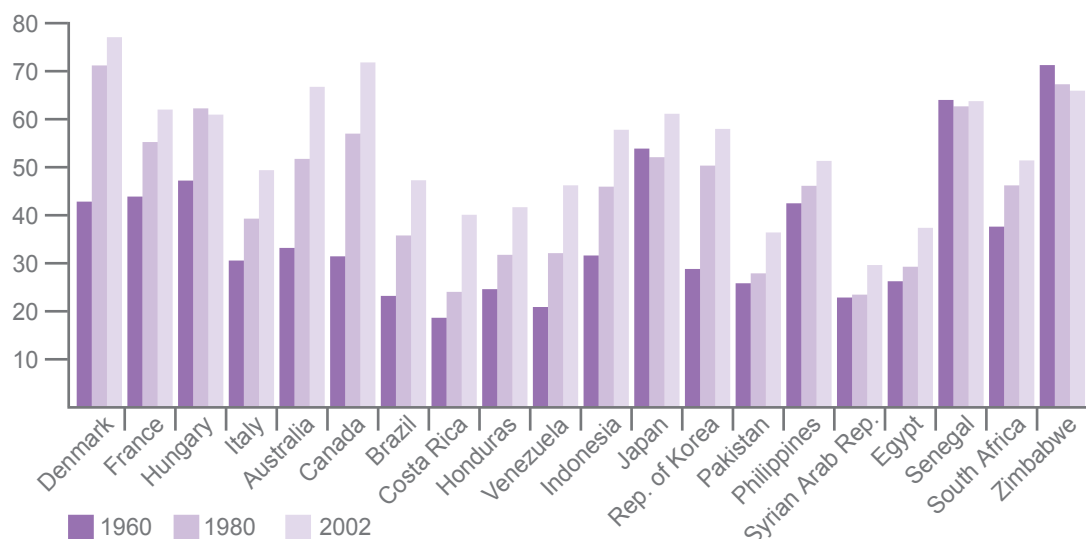
work outside the home. Men became the income earners or “breadwinners”, while the women concentrated on caring for dependents and unpaid domestic tasks. With the woman looking after the home, the male breadwinner was not encumbered by family responsibilities and so could work long hours, be available for overtime and rarely miss work because of family problems.

Women’s labour market participation increases

Since the Second World War, women’s participation in income earning outside the home has been increasing consistently and significantly in almost all countries. The increase in women’s labour force participation

has been the result of factors related both to women’s and families’ needs for income and to the demand for women’s labour. Increasingly, both members of a couple are employed outside the home.

Percentage of women over 15 years of age who are economically active



Source: ILO: Estimates and projections databases (LABPROJ) (Geneva, 2004).

Decreasing availability of family support

For domestic tasks and care of children and the elderly, many workers in dual-earner couples or single-parent situations have traditionally been able to count on help from non-working women relatives. However, in almost all countries, both developed

and developing, traditional family support for care roles and domestic tasks, while still frequent, is becoming less available with urbanization, the increased labour force participation of women and rural-urban migration.

Increasing pressures of work

From the point of view of enterprises, they are also under pressure and facing an increasingly competitive business environment, often on a global market. Managers are under strong pressure to deliver in terms

of quality, costs and strict deadlines. These pressures may be passed on to their personnel, resulting in high demands in terms of productivity and working time and decreased security of employment.

HIV/AIDS increases the stress

For families affected by HIV/AIDS, the situation is often dramatic, as the caring needs of family members increase at a time when additional income is needed for medical expenses and to compensate for the eventual loss of the income of the infected member.

What are the problems?

The interacting trends in workplaces and in families can lead to considerable conflicts and stress for workers and their families, as well as negative consequences for the workplace and society as a whole.

For families: The declining availability of family support for care responsibilities, combined with increasing pressures in the work environment (including insufficient and insecure incomes), is putting considerable strain on families. For childcare, families may be reduced to less than satisfactory 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 India it is estimated that 7 or 8 million children accompany their parents (mostly mothers) on building sites.

For workers: Workers in many countries (both men and women) are feeling increasingly stressed by the competing demands of work and family for their time and their energy. The pressures and stress are particularly high for

women workers, who typically continue to assume responsibility for domestic tasks and care of dependents. Dealing with family emergencies — such as a sick child or parent — can lead to absenteeism, for which pay may be lost and, in some extreme cases, the result may be dismissal.

For work: The problems which work-family conflicts pose for workers inevitably impact on the workplace. Problems such as turnover and difficulties in recruiting appropriate personnel may be related to the incompatibility of working conditions with family responsibilities. Absenteeism and tardiness may be the result of work-family conflicts which could be avoided. 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, research suggests that many enterprises are just unaware of the business benefits that can be acquired by adopting a more family-friendly stance.



For societies: Work-family conflicts can have general effects on society as a whole:

- Perpetuating poverty and the inequities within society, since family responsibilities can constrain possibilities for income generation, particularly for low-income families who cannot afford paid solutions such as domestic help or day care;
- Creating difficulties for the provision of appropriate care for dependent children and the elderly;
- Preventing the labour force participation of women and the use of their education and skills;
- Contributing to a decline in fertility by discouraging parenthood (particularly motherhood); and
- Preventing equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women in employment, since the constraints and disadvantages that family responsibilities bring in the labour market fall mainly on women.

Moving towards solutions

In many countries, public and workplace policies have been slow to catch up with the social and economic realities of work-family conflicts and their impact on the lives of both men and women. This is understandable, since questions related to family are at the core of the organization of society, are highly emotional and strongly linked to national or local values concerning the family.

Making the workplace and working conditions more family-friendly in a specific cultural context, while ensuring the competitiveness of enterprises, requires tripartite dialogue and collaboration. It also requires enlarged dialogue with the many stakeholders and potential partners, such as religious leaders, women's NGOs, childcare providers, etc.

While the government sets the basic legislative and policy context, much can be done at the enterprise

level, through collective bargaining agreements and/or management practices, to make conditions of work more compatible with family responsibilities (see Information Sheet No. WF-3, on the family-friendly workplace).

To address work-family reconciliation, the solutions can basically be of two types:

- Measures that make family responsibilities (such as childcare and domestic tasks) more compatible with work; and
- Measures that make working conditions (such as leave, working hours and place) more compatible with family responsibilities.

The information sheets in this series provide more details on the issues and ways of moving towards solutions.