



## Addressing gender equality through work-family measures

Family responsibilities and their conflict with work demands are major factors contributing to women's disadvantage in the labour market and preventing the attainment of equal opportunity and treatment for men and women in employment. Similarly, work-family conflicts are contributing to men's disadvantage in the family and limiting their ability to be involved in family matters.

Measures to help reconcile work and family can contribute to equal opportunity and treatment in employment. Indeed, Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities sees equality of opportunity as the overall

objective of work-family measures. However, not all work-family measures promote equality. As noted in the recent ILO Global Report: "There is a danger that work/family policies, which are often aimed implicitly or explicitly at women in particular, may end up reinforcing the image of women as 'secondary earners' and accruing to the double burden of working women".<sup>1</sup>

This Information Sheet considers briefly how family responsibilities are affecting equality of opportunity and treatment in employment, and then proposes some strategic orientations of work-family measures to reduce inequalities.

### How do family responsibilities affect equality of opportunity and treatment?

Family responsibilities (caring for children and other dependents, doing domestic tasks) can be a major handicap in the labour market, restricting options and limiting earning capacity. This is the case for both men and women as recognized in Convention No. 156, which provides that all workers with family responsibilities should not be subject to discrimination.

However, in most societies, the division of family responsibilities within the couple is such that the bulk continues to remain the task of women. In dual-earner families, one member (usually the man) tends to continue to perform as an "ideal" worker with no family constraints, while the other member (usually the woman) looks for work options — such as part-time work, self-employment or home work — which are more compatible with family responsibilities, even though earnings would be less.

This division of labour within a family is particularly encouraged by:

- a lack of affordable and convenient support services (e.g. childcare, domestic help); and
- the demands on full-time workers to be available for long, unpredictable working hours, which make it difficult for both partners to have a demanding full-time employment.

The strains are clearly highest for single parents, often women, whose caring responsibilities make it difficult to earn a decent income.

In the workplace, women may be penalized because the image persists that they are not serious about their jobs and careers, given that family responsibilities continue to conflict with working conditions. Managers may hesitate to hire women for certain types of jobs, often those with better career prospects, and to invest in their training on the assumption that current or future family responsibilities will pose problems.

## Strategic approaches to promoting equality

Combating discrimination based on family responsibilities is difficult, given the persistence of the traditional male breadwinner with no family responsibilities as the model for the ideal worker. The following are some orientations for work-family measures that address inequalities in opportunity and treatment in the labour market.

### Recognizing men's caring role

Many well-meaning policies and measures designed to reduce work-family conflicts and protect workers with family roles can turn out, in practice, to reinforce the gender distribution of household responsibilities and perpetuate the “male breadwinner” model. One reason is that these measures assume that care for family dependents is only the responsibility of women and fail to recognize that men also may have a caring role (see box). For example, measures relating to family responsibilities — such as parental leave after the initial maternity leave or childcare facilities — should be

available to both men and women as foreseen in Convention No.156.

Workplace culture also plays a role in discouraging men from assuming family responsibilities; for example, managers may be less understanding of a father who needs to get a sick child from school than of a mother. Fathers may fear that giving some priority to family responsibilities may mean they will be seen as less committed to their work and their career may be affected. Greater awareness and acceptance of the caring role of men would help enable men to take their share of these responsibilities.

### *Childcare and men*

*To establish the needs of its employees, in the early 1980s, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power did a comprehensive childcare survey of its women employees. An important finding of the survey was that many of the male employees were outraged that they hadn't been included because they had childcare problems too.*

Source: C. M. Solomon: “Work/family ideas that break boundaries”, in *Personnel Journal* (Santa Monica), Vol. 71, No.10, October 1992, p. 112.

### Making “normal” work more family compatible

Particular attention should be given to general measures for improving working conditions and the quality of life, including measures aimed at

- (a) the progressive reduction of daily hours of work and the reduction of overtime;
- (b) more flexible arrangements as concerns working schedules, rest periods and holidays.

(Recommendation No.165 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, Article 18)

Policies that put into question the “ideal worker model” — by discouraging excessive working hours and promoting flexibility for all workers — would help make work more life-friendly for all workers and more family-friendly for those with family responsibilities. Also, it can be argued that policies to reduce the “normal” working week have the potential for contributing to gender equality by creating the possibility of more equitable sharing of family responsibilities. At the same time, this would help to reduce the need

for special arrangements or different types of jobs for workers with family responsibilities.

An increasingly popular way of making normal working hours more compatible with family responsibilities (and with other life interests) is flexitime, a system of allowing workers some choice on when they work their hours (see Information Sheet No. WF-5 on family-friendly working time). Such schemes have the advantage of being available to a certain categories of workers whatever their family responsibilities.

## Making family responsibilities more compatible with work

*All measures compatible with national conditions and possibilities shall be taken ... to develop or promote community services, public or private such as childcare and family services and facilities [Convention No.156, Article 5(b)].*

For families with children, organizing family schedules to fit with normal working hours can be difficult: opening hours of schools and kindergartens may not be convenient; there is no possibility of supervision of school children during lunch or after school; school holidays are longer than workers' vacation leave and not necessarily synchronized.

The availability of affordable childcare both for pre-schoolers and young children in school is a key factor in whether women can consider taking employment and the constraints on their participation. Labour force surveys in Europe, for example, indicate that the proportion of women of working age who are not employed because of family responsibilities is highest (around 30 per cent) in Ireland, Italy and Greece, countries where childcare facilities have been lacking, whereas the proportion is particularly low in Denmark and Sweden (2 to 3 per cent), countries known for their facilities for childcare and other work-family measures.<sup>2</sup>

### Childcare and equality

*Childcare is crucially important for women to achieve true equality of opportunity. Lack of childcare has a large impact on women's pay rates because it affects both the type of work they are able to take and their hours of work.*

Source: Equal Opportunities Commission: *How can suitable, affordable childcare be provided for all parents who need to work?* submission to the Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry (London, 2003). Document can be found at [www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk).



## Adequate regulation and supervision of part-time work and home work

As foreseen in Recommendation No.165 (paragraph 21), it is important to ensure that the terms and conditions of part-time workers and homeworkers are adequately regulated so that workers with family responsibilities who use these options do not find themselves in vulnerable situations, paying an inordinately high price for family constraints.

## More equal sharing of household and family responsibilities

*The competent authorities ... should take appropriate measures ... to promote such education as will encourage the sharing of family responsibilities between men and women [Recommendation No. 165, paragraph 11(b)].*

More equal sharing of household and family responsibilities would, in principle, contribute to reducing the labour market inequalities between men and women. But research suggests that even when men spend

time on household tasks, they tend to spend much less time than women. This may be partly explained by the longer working hours of men who, in consequence, have less time available for household tasks. But cultural conceptions of men's roles no doubt also play an important part. Data from Sweden show that change can occur: data on the amount of time spent in domestic tasks indicate that men are increasing their share, such that 40 per cent of time spent on household activities is that of men.<sup>3</sup>

## Lightening the load

*The competent authorities and bodies in each country should promote such public and private action as is possible to lighten the burden deriving from the family responsibilities of workers (Recommendation No. 165, paragraph 32).*

Household work can be particularly arduous in developing countries, where

there is relatively little access to labour-saving devices that would reduce the time necessary for cooking, cleaning and doing the laundry. For poor households that lack electricity and running water, the burden is particularly heavy. Finding ways of lightening the load would contribute in reducing the constraints to employment of those responsible for domestic tasks.

<sup>1</sup> ILO: *Time for equality at work: Global report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work 2003* (Geneva, 2003), p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> A. Van Bastelaer and L. Blondal: "Labour reserve: People outside the labour market", in *Statistics in focus: Population and social conditions* (Eurostat, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> D. Anxo: "Time allocation and the gender division of labour in France and Sweden", in P. Auer and B. Gazier (eds.): *The future of work, employment and social protection: The dynamics of change and the protection of workers* (Geneva, ILO, 2002), p. 102.