



INTERNATIONAL  
DAY OF FAMILIES  
15 MAY 2012

**International Day of Families 2012**  
**“Ensuring Work-Family Balance”**  
**15 May 2012**

***Background Note***

***Trends impacting work-family balance***

Over the past decades several demographic and socio-economic trends led to major changes in work and family life. Demographic trends towards smaller households, growing women’s labour participation as well as rapid urbanization and greater mobility in search of better job opportunities, have resulted in weakening of traditional extended family networks offering care support for younger and vulnerable family members.

As extended kin are less available to care for the young, employed parents find it more difficult to manage working environment with caring for children and fulfilling other family responsibilities. In particular, being active in an increasingly competitive labour market to provide economically and having enough time to care for the young and vulnerable members of families is a main challenge for contemporary parents.

Globally, 52 per cent of women are in the labour market with over half mothers across the OECD countries in labour force before their child reaches 3 years of age. In addition to care for young children, families face multiple obligations, such as caring for older relatives, family members with disabilities or young people who tend to leave their families later in life. Consequently, employed parents often experience escalating family responsibilities to several generations at the same time.

Work responsibilities have increased as well. Although regular working hours in developed countries seem to plateau or decline, they remain high in

developing countries, especially in Asia. Moreover, according to European data, non-standard 'atypical working hours', such as work on weekends or at night, as well as bringing work home, are becoming more common as well, making it more difficult to balance work and care responsibilities.

There is a growing body of research linking long working hours with higher absenteeism due to illness and lower productivity. Excessive working hours reduce the time parents spend with their children and have a negative impact on family interactions.

In light of these trends, supporting formal policies as well as practical strategies promoting reconciliation of work and care responsibilities for families, especially those with young children, is becoming an important family policy goal.

### ***Family oriented policies and programmes for work- family balance***

Family focused policies and programmes promoting work-family balance vary across the regions. They may range from parental leave provisions and flexible working arrangements to child benefits and access to quality and affordable childcare.

#### ***Parental leaves***

Maternity and paternity leaves upon the birth of a child and parental leave to care for a young child are offered in the majority of developed countries as well as many developing middle income countries. In the majority of developing countries, however, few provide comprehensive benefits in accordance with the ILO standards. The uptake of parental leaves, especially paternity leaves can also be hindered by work-place cultures and societal expectations.

Maternity leave provisions have been associated with reduction in infant mortality and morbidity and higher rates of breastfeeding. Paternal leave taking often results in fathers' practical and emotional investment in infant care and has been linked to higher level of father involvement in family responsibilities later on.

#### ***Gender equality & the role of men in families***

Gender equity goals are directly linked to ensuring work-family balance. Out of choice and necessity, women enter the paid labour force in growing numbers, where they are often discriminated in access to employment and benefits. At the same time, both women and girls still continue to bear most responsibilities for the household. In all regions, women spend at least twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic work. In some countries, women spend up to ten times as much time as men on caring for children. When unpaid work is taken into account, women's total work hours are longer than men's in all

regions. Continued limited participation of men in care work is often considered a major obstacle to gender equality and women's empowerment.

This trend, however, is slowly changing and men's roles as fathers and caregivers in families, going beyond income provision, are gradually being recognized more in many parts in the world. Engaging men and boys in gender equality efforts and encouraging them to take up a bigger share of household and care responsibilities is a policy priority in many countries. Such strategies have a positive impact on gender equality; contribute to fairer distribution of family responsibilities between both parents and help achieve work-life balance for all family members.

### ***Flexible working arrangements***

Over the past decade, there have been growing efforts to create 'family friendly' work places by offering flexible working opportunities, such as: flexi-time schedules; working from home; part-time work; or working time adjusted to school timetable, without loss of pay. In the majority of developed countries informal arrangements exist and in some developing countries informal codes of good practice have been introduced but a legal right to request flexible working arrangements is generally rare.

Flexible working arrangements are more common in larger organizations with lower level of competition and recognized trade unions. They are also more frequent in the public sector jobs, work places where strong equal opportunities exist and where more employers are involved in decision making.

Flexible working opportunities result in better health outcomes for parents and children. At a company level, they have also been associated with employee productivity, organizational commitment, retention, moral, job satisfaction and reductions in absenteeism.

### ***Quality childcare***

With the growth of women's professional aspirations and the need to obtain gainful employment to provide economically for their families, formal child care provisions have been adopted in most countries. Investments in early childhood education and quality child care are seen as a form of support for parents with young children to help them remain engaged in paid work. However, although primarily driven by the concern about female labour supply, the policies also aim at promoting fertility, gender equality and child well-being.

Childcare provision and subsidies for private childcare arrangements are considered an important part of work-family balance strategies in developed countries. The importance of early childhood care and education has also been

emphasized at the international forum, e.g. by UNICEF and ILO in the context of work-family balance and decent work.

In the majority of developing countries, affordable quality child care facilities with professional staff, proper equipment and sanitary conditions are rare. Often, re-occurrence of accidents and mistreatment of children discourages parents from using ill-equipped childcare facilities. According to comparative fieldwork, poor families are often forced to leave their preschool children at home alone or in the care of older siblings, making them more prone to injuries and accidents as well. At the same time, there are numerous examples of innovative workplace solutions in developing countries, many funded from mixed partnerships between employer organizations, workers, and local government bodies able to provide child care options for working parents.

As far as the impact of child care arrangements on children's well-being is concerned, some research indicates that stable parental care for infants is of utmost importance, and recommends that optimally young children should not be left in poor quality non-parental care arrangements. More consensus has been found on benefits of early childhood education, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Overall, a wide range of childcare arrangements should be advocated. Support for mothers who opt to stay at home with their children beyond the maternity leave period has often been recommended in the context of unpaid work. In some countries grandparent child care benefit has been introduced to assist families with the costs of child care.

### ***A way forward***

Work-family balance lies at the core of the ability of the family to provide economically and emotionally for its members. A variety of strategies to help families cope with work and family responsibilities is being used around the world. In the majority of developing countries, however, reconciliation of work and family life policies competes with a large number of development priorities. Moreover, access to work-family balance support systems is chiefly in the formal and regulated labour markets while many workers in the informal sector face not only family-unfriendly but also dangerous work environments. Global employment protection is then needed to secure better working conditions, especially for poor working families.

Family-friendly strategies facilitating work-family balance have a key role in supporting parents to raise the next generation of children and ensure harmonious family relations. Work-family balance policies also demonstrate Governments commitment to the well-being of families and employers' social responsibility and contribute to successful labour relations, employee health and well-being, gender equality and child welfare.

It is important to share knowledge about good practices in work-family balance being implemented and advocated for by Governments, private sector, civil society and academic institutions. Promoting professional support and advice and efforts to create a more family-friendly culture in the workplace are equally important. Wide-ranging consultation and partnerships between employers, trade unions and employees to promote better understanding of the importance of work-family reconciliation is strongly encouraged to improve the well-being of families worldwide.

*For additional information:*

Hein, C. & N. Cassirer (2010) *Workplace solutions for childcare*.  
International Labour Organisation, Geneva.

Heymann, Jody (2006). *Forgotten Families. Ending the Growing Crisis  
Confronting Children and Working Parents in the Global Economy*.  
Oxford University Press, New York, 2006.

Men Care. A Global Fatherhood Campaign ([www.Men-Care.org](http://www.Men-Care.org)).

O'Brien, Margaret (2012). *Work-Family Balance Policies*. Background  
paper. UNDESA, New York.

United Nations (2011). *Men in Families and Family Policy in a Changing  
World*. New York.

United Nations (2010). *The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics*.  
New York.

United Nations (2011). *Report of the Secretary-General on the  
Preparations for and Observance of the twentieth anniversary of the  
International Year of the Family in 2014*. New York.