**UNITED NATIONS EXPERT GROUP MEETING**

**"ASSESSING FAMILY POLICIES:
CONFRONTING FAMILY POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION
& ENSURING WORK-FAMILY BALANCE"**

**NEW YORK, 1 – 3 JUNE 2011**

**SESSION VIII**

**WORK-FAMILY BALANCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY FOCUSED SOLUTIONS
CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

IGNACIO SOCÍAS

1. The Report of the Secretary-General of United Nations on the 'Follow-up to the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond' [1] points out three main characteristics of today's society regarding relations between work and family:

   - "Families find it more and more difficult to reconcile the competing necessities of their work and family obligations."

   - "The burden of care quasi-universally placed on women tends to significantly limit their access to employment and social participation."

   - "Whereas both women and men are engaged in gainful employment, the domestic workload still remains the responsibility of women for the most part, a fact that remains largely unaddressed in the context of both legal and social policy frameworks."

   These features explain why "comprehensive legal and policy frameworks balancing work and family life should be established to allow for shared care responsibilities between men and women, other family members, the State, the private sector and society as a whole."

**Work-life Synergies Replaces Work-life Conflict**

2. A report published by The Family Watch [2] points out that "the long period of time when experts only talked about 'work-life conflict' is now in the distant past. These days, it is becoming increasingly common to hear about 'synergies' between the two worlds, and

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[1] 'Follow-up to the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond - Report of the Secretary-General' (United Nations, 29 November 2010).

[2] 'The Family Watch' is a think tank committed to researching the family and finding solutions to the problems it faces.

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'win-win' solutions are starting to be identified. There are three main areas of development in terms of these 'synergies', and, whilst there is still a long way to go, some achievements can already be seen." [3]

3. In fact, "the success of policies to reconcile work and family life is often summarized by pointing out that for more than 15 years, among members of the OECD, the countries with the highest fertility and lowest poverty rates have been those where a high percentage of women perform paid work. In these countries pro-family policies seem to strike a balance that is favorable to both women's employment and fertility. For this reason especially, work and family reconciliation policies are on the political agenda of a growing number of Western countries." [4]

4. But this is nothing new. "Mothers have always worked. Throughout all of history, mothers have given birth to children, nourished and nurtured family members, and labored on the family farm or enterprise. […] The possibility for one adult to work away from the home depended on the commitment of another adult to maintain the home and care for the children. This model of mutual trust and complementarity is mainly based on interdependence and appreciation for mutually advantageous contributions." [5]

5. French Sociologist Letablier adds that "it is often argued that employment-related policies are most cost-effective, since they combine different objectives. In this case, however, the support needs to be sufficiently wide ranging to meet the needs of families. Thus, policies that encourage parents, living alone or with partners, to be in work are found to offer an efficient means of reducing the risk of poverty, while raising the standard of living of families with children and promoting greater gender equality in the labor market. Higher employment rates can also generate a higher income for the state by means of taxation, which can contribute to the funding of social and family policies. This virtuous circle can be achieved, however, only if the support provided is sufficient to meet the basic needs of families and to help both parents combine work and family life and to share caring tasks. If the policy is too narrowly focused on work, it does neither improve the standard of living of families, nor prevent income inequalities, nor promote child development or higher fertility rates... The most positive outcomes are observed in countries where support is wide ranging." [6]

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[3] N. Chinchilla and C. León, 'Diez años de conciliación en España', (International Center for Work and Family – The Family Watch, 2011).

[4] Olivier Thévenon, 'Family Policies in OECD Countries: A Comparative Analysis' (OECD, 2011).

[5] J. Stevens, J. de Bergeyck and A. C. de Liederkerke, 'Realities of Mothers in Europe' (MMMEurope, 2011).

[6] As quoted in J. Stevens, J. de Bergeyck and A. C. de Liederkerke, 'Realities of Mothers...'.

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## The Family as a School of Competencies

6. This requires us to consider the family as a school for managerial skills development. As in most behavioral fields, the family is where we learn to exercise competencies. It "is an excellent area for developing managerial skills, not only at a personal level (empathy, communication, time management, pro-activeness, integrity, self-leadership), but also in terms of other strategic skills (negotiation, teamwork, delegation, etc). All of these competencies help employees manage complexity in a more effective way. The family –which, after all, is like a mini-company with its own mission and common goals– and the organization, are both areas of personal and professional development which mutually reinforce each other, thereby contributing to social richness and sustainability." [7]

7. As IFFD [8] is an organization centered on helping parents to fulfill their task, we would like to highlight that when solutions for balancing work and family come only from companies, they are always partial and insufficient. This is especially true if they are focused exclusively on freeing up time for workers to be at home, assuming erroneously than this is necessarily going to have a positive impact on emotional stability and, therefore, on their work efficiency.

8. 'Going home' will only be enriching when we find there a stimulating, appealing and creative family environment, not a stressful and disappointing atmosphere. And this is something that needs time and effort to be built and maintained by both parents. Many studies show that a stable home life is important to eliminate lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, insecurities, fear, depression, mental problems, etc., but it should also be considered from the perspective of gaining the strength to work effectively.

9. If managers realized the benefits of reinforcing the family from inside, they would probably also be more willing to help, considering it a way to improve employees' effectiveness in the company, instead of as a burden.

## Balance and Flexibility

10. Another finding of the report by The Family Watch is that flexibility is essential nowadays, but it must be focused, because there is a type of 'lost profit': a profit which stops being perceived when there aren't company policies in place to facilitate work-life balance. At an international level, different studies already indicate the cost of this lost op-

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[7] N. Chinchilla and C. León, 'Diez años ...'.

[8] The Family Watch was founded under the inspiration of the International Federation for Family Development and is a member of it.

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portunity, given the indirect effects of a badly structured work life, lacking in flexibility and not in line with globalization and the new scheduling requirements of a society in which both parents work.[9] Companies which are overly rigid in terms of schedules, and which aren't sensitive to employees' personal and family situations, are less attractive and more likely to lose specific human capital, in terms of higher rates of absenteeism, a lower rate of employee commitment, and greater turnover.

In times of recession, the importance of this aspect goes beyond the contractual relationship. It also affects creativity and innovation, which are essential to develop new products and services, and more efficient processes, to help increase a company's competitive edge.

11. The most important benefits of this flexibility include:

- Reduction of stress and the feeling of working a 'double day.'

- Increase in employee well-being in the workplace, and the positive repercussions of this in the family environment.

- Improvements in productivity for both the employee and the company as a whole.

- Return on investment in times of talent scarcity and/or when the company establishes attracting and retaining employees as a priority. Reduction in unwanted turnover and absenteeism.

- A 'balanced' worker has a positive influence on society as a whole, so we can talk about improvements in terms of citizenship and social commitment, as well as identification with the mission of the company, even in the case of non-compensated leaves of absence.

- Share prices can be positively affected just by the company's public commitment to these matters.

12. Consequently, "productivity and competitiveness are the key issues when it comes to the sustainability and reform of the state of well-being. For this reason, the importance of non-compensatory incentives will reach new heights. There is absolutely no doubt that work-life balance policies are increasingly important given that they are capable of achieving a special type of return on investment in the form of highly productive teams. It is generally the case that the achieving of objectives requires a certain level of flexibility,

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[9] A. N. Oppenheim, 'Questionnaire Design, interviewing and attitude measurement' (Continuum International Publishing Group, 1992); J. M. Brett, L. K. Stroh and A. H. Reilly, 'Pulling up roots in the 1990s: Who's willing to relocate?' (Journal of Organizational Behavior, 14, pp. 49-60, 1993); C. W. Konek and S. L. Kitch, 'Women and careers: Issues and challenges' (Sage Publications, 1994); J. H. Greenhaus, K. M. Collins, R. Singh and S. Parasuraman, 'Work and family influences on departure from public accounting' (Journal of Vocational Behavior, 50, pp. 249-270, 1997).

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and this same flexibility can, in turn, help achieve harmony in the progress and development of employees' career paths. There are also results which demonstrate the positive impact of flexible schedules on innovation in organizations, through a greater contribution of value by the employee which goes beyond productivity per hour worked." [10]

### Different Roles for the Same Person

13. According to another study, carried out by the Spanish Business School IESE among 5,000 families [11], each person's own way of dealing with their multiple roles – professional, family and social– is the main factor that affects whether or not work-life balance is actually achieved, over other external factors, such as school schedules and social and company policies. At the end of the day, it is that one person who works, lives, cares for people, loves and builds relationships. "This means that the success of any agreements in this area will basically depend on the attitude and personal priorities of that particular person. This is why there is such an urgent need to provide training on these matters to managers, middle-managers and employees." [12]

    There are also other factors that must be taken into consideration: the personality type of the employee, their time management style, and how demanding they are with themselves; the marital relationship, and the extent to which each partner contributes to the running of the home; the age of the children; the level of domestic help; and the support received from managers and colleagues at work.

14. The idea is to "refocus public policy toward social sustainability, offering support to the family unit as the fundamental area for socialization, a generator of social capital and an informal supporter of the formal system of the visible economy. Supporting the family is cheaper and more effective. Human ecology is the basis for social sustainability." Moreover, "talent, commitment and innovation are the three main variables which affect how companies face the future and a failure to be at the forefront of the main issues which affect people, the core of any company, is too high a price for companies to pay in order to remain competitive." [13]

15. Unfortunately, all this is not as common as it should be. According to the 'European Company Survey on Reconciliation of Work and Family Life', "family-focused services are

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[10] N. Chinchilla and C. León, 'Diez años …'.

[11] N. Chinchilla, S. Poelmans, C. León and S. Gallo, 'Dues professions i una família' (Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament de Benestar Social, 2003).

[12] N. Chinchilla and M. Moragas, 'Dueños de nuestro destino' (Ariel, 2007).

[13] N. Chinchilla and C. León, 'Diez años …'.

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more the exception than the rule. The provision of services to support employees in their household and leisure activities, and to inform and advise them on legal matters plays hardly any role at all." [14]

Similarly, the 'Second European Quality of Life Survey' says that "Overall, Europeans are more dissatisfied with the amount of time they spend with their family than with the amount of time spent at work, family life being more adapted to employment requirements than work arrangements are to family life." [15]

16. "Unpaid work – largely dominated by cooking, cleaning and caring – is an important contributor to societal well-being in ways that differ both between countries and between men and women. Our calculations suggest that between one-third and half of all valuable economic activity in OECD countries is not accounted for in the traditional measures of well-being, such as GDP per capita. Unpaid work contributes not only to current household consumption (e.g. cooking) but also to future well-being (e.g. parental investments in raising children) and to community well-being (e.g. voluntary work). In all countries, women do more of such work than men, although to some degree balanced – by an amount varying across countries – by the fact that they do less market work." [16]

17. "In the end, the challenge to balance work and family will be more than an individual effort. Beyond the family itself, if we as a society wish to embrace the positive aspects of change, we need a major rethink about the importance of our families and their place within our working lives. It will require policies and strategies that pay more than lip service to the importance of the family unit, principles of gender equality, and greater flexibility in working arrangements for women." [17]

## Specific Recommendations for Governments and Civil Society

18. Family-work balance is a complex issue that involves financial values, gender roles, career paths, time management and many other factors. Hidden values and models from our cultures, original families and other sources influence our choices in ways that we often don't anticipate or understand, and that have far-reaching consequences for our lives.

[14] 'European Company Survey on Reconciliation of Work and Family Life' (German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and the Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2010).

[15] 'Second European Quality of Life Survey - Family life and work' (Eurofound, 2010).

[16] Verrle Miranda, 'Cooking, Caring and Volunteering: Unpaid Work Around the World' (OECD, 2010).

[17] M. Sanders, 'Balancing Work and Family' (University of Auckland, 'Positive Parenting Program', 2010).

[19] N. Chinchilla, M. Las Heras and A. D. Masuda, 'Balancing Work and Family: A Practical Guide to Help Organizations Meet the Global Workforce Challenge' (HRD Press, 2010).

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Like so many of the challenges and dilemmas of marriage, balancing family and work has no easy solution,: no one-size-fits-all approach. Every person and couple will have their own preferences and needs.

For instance, most working mothers usually want flexible hours, but working from home may have some difficulties, especially when it means doing it at the same time as caring for children. And it can also be isolating, especially for introverts who need the encouragement of close quarters to interact with their co-workers.

19. Family-work balance is also a process, not a static achievement. The process nature of balance means that you can and must adjust it as required. No decision, plan or approach need be permanent. If it's not working or satisfying, you can reconsider and make changes. In fact, constant tactical adjustment and flexibility to keep on target toward your goals and priorities is a hallmark of couples who are satisfied with their balance.

20. Masuda and McNall mention as well that "it is important to understand a nation's set of cultural values and public-welfare structures before implementing work-family policies. Organizations that acknowledge the multitude of human diversities and learn the fundamental environmental and cultural differences of each nation and region will be better equipped to develop culturally sensitive solutions to the universal problem of work-family conflict." As a practical summary, they suggest assessing "these three aspects of the country: the country's culture; the country's economy; and the country's sociopolitical environment." [19]

21. Consequently, specific recommendations for policy makers and practitioners should include:

- **Identifying employee preferences and supporting their choices**

    This way, employees will feel comfortable with their environment and, therefore, fulfill their roles as parents and workers better. Masuda and McNall suggest considering "interviewing employees or sending out surveys to learn more about the competing demands on their time and what might help them achieve greater work-family balance. When possible, let employees choose from a variety of different work-family benefits, since employees often have different needs at different stages in life." [20]

- **Promote social recognition for family-friendly attitudes and decisions**

    When a restaurant provides a family menu, a car dealer gives special deals for family minivans, or a hotel offers free stays for kids, customers get the message that their de-

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[20] N. Chinchilla, M. Las Heras and A. D. Masuda, 'Balancing Work and Family...'.

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cision to have children deserves some benefits. When a company decides to offer some extra parental leave, a remote work agreement, or part-time arrangements, workers perceive that their family needs are being met. When policy makers give benefits to businesses which care about customers who are parents, and companies that try to help employees who want to reconcile work and family life, the social impact of these initiatives is multiplied.

- **Remove prejudices and stigmas which counteract their effect**

  If employees perceive that there is a stigma associated with taking family leave or working from home, they are less likely to participate in such initiatives. If employees feel like there are unwritten penalties, it is necessary to consider what actions could be taken to change these perceptions. This means that sometimes it is more important to choose the policies which will be most easily accepted according to cultural background, instead of those which may be considered better from a universal perspective.

- **Demonstrate the benefits of a family-friendly company, for managers, for employees, and for clients**

  For example, this is how one managing director explains that their family-friendly policies have delivered excellent staff morale, better customer service and low staff turnover. "Our workforce is highly motivated and staff turnover is about two-thirds of the national average for our sector. Our policies have also led to several national awards that have enhanced our reputation with both clients and employees. We're constantly approached by people who want to work here and we no longer pay for recruitment advertising." [21]

- **Teach companies how to evaluate the effectiveness of work-family initiatives**

  "After implementing a work-family policy, it is important to see if it is working as intended. Consider identifying who is/is not participating in the program and the reasons why. To understand the 'why', monitor the environment at all levels (individual, organizational, and national). Have there been any changes in the country's welfare system? Have there been any changes in the needs of individuals? Have there been any changes in organizational factors, such as leadership? When necessary, make modifications to the program based on this feedback." [22]

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[21] 'Here's how family-friendly policies have helped our business' (Business Link - UK government's online resource for businesses, 2010).

[22] N. Chinchilla, M. Las Heras and A. D. Masuda, 'Balancing Work and Family...'.

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22. These recommendations can also be useful to assess policies and decisions once they are put into practice.

23. Finally, Family Enrichment courses (such as those developed by IFFD) can become a key instrument to promote reconciliation between work and family life. Some background guidelines that should be included for this purpose are the following:

- Reconciliation means choosing, and choosing means dismissing and learning to prioritize. We shouldn't be worried by what we have to leave aside if what we gain by it fits our overall life project better.

- Success at work shouldn't just mean prestige, but being able to integrate our job into the whole of our lives. True self-esteem means feeling helpful to others, more than just being praised by them.

- Part of this integration will often include negotiation to replace 'presence control' with 'goal direction', and learning how to 'change roles' when arriving home, leaving all worries and burdens outside the door.