Families at Work:
What We Know About Conditions Globally

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Over the past several decades, the conditions under which parents work and children are raised have changed dramatically; even since the Year of the Family in 1994, changes have occurred. As this twenty-year anniversary approaches, it is important for us to take a step back and assess how the world is doing when it comes to supporting working families, and how far we still have to go.

In discussing parental leave, breastfeeding breaks, early childhood care and education, leave for children's health needs, and policies affecting parents' time with their children, this paper focuses on the particular needs of families from a child's birth through primary school. While we do not have space to discuss the following issues here, we believe equal attention should be paid to the needs of secondary school-aged children as well as the earning capacity of parents to support their families.

Global Transformations in the World of Work

The transformations that have occurred over the past few decades throw the need for additional support for working families around the world in stark relief. The ability of working adults to succeed at work while meeting the needs of those at home is fundamentally shaped by their working conditions. Workplace policies designed with the assumption that one parent was able to stay home no longer reflect the reality of most families. Conservatively estimated, 930 million children under the age of 14 live in households where all adults work for pay outside the home; 340 million of these children are under the age of six.[1]

A major trend in the world of work over the past half century is the high or rising proportion of working women. Over the 50 years between 1960 and 2009, the female proportion of the labor force has increased significantly in the Americas – from 32% to 46% in the United States, from 25% to 47% in Canada, and from 21% to 41% in Latin America and the Caribbean. In East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of working women was already at least 40 percent in 1960, and has remained at this level or slightly increased. In the Middle East and North Africa, there was a small increase in the proportion of women in the labor force, from 21 percent to 25 percent; South Asia was the only region to experience a small decline in women's labor force participation, from 34 to 29 percent.[2]

Women's participation in the workforce has brought advances in terms of gender equity and improvements in many families' incomes. At the same time, in the absence of significant changes in men's work and home lives, these changes have raised challenges in meeting family needs while succeeding at work.

As well as the composition of the labor force, conditions of work are changing. Globalization has brought new opportunities to working families in the form of different income-earning possibilities, but it has also brought challenges. The rise of the 24/7 economy has led to an increase in the prevalence of evening and night work, and

associated challenges for caregiving. Globalization has also meant that in some countries, there has been downward pressure on income and working conditions as companies threaten to relocate to countries with fewer protections as increased trade has improved conditions in other nations. These potential pressures make national guarantees more critical than ever before – reinforcing the need for a global floor of labor protections so that employers are not tempted to compete by lowering standards below the minimum that a family needs, and so that companies and economies providing good working conditions and living wages are not penalized.

Additionally, as economies the world over transition from largely agricultural to largely industrial or service-based, the proportion of the global population living in cities has risen rapidly from less than 30 percent in 1950 to over 50 percent in 2010, and is expected to reach 70 percent by 2050.[3] In many cases, urbanization means that young people or nuclear families are moving away from extended family members on whom they previously relied to help with caregiving.[4]

So, where does the world stand on policies affecting working parents' ability to do their jobs and meet the needs of their families? In order to answer this question and others, at the Institute for Health and Social Policy we have developed the World Policy Analysis Centre, a growing collection of globally available and quantitatively comparable information on key laws and policies around the world, including labor policies. By reviewing original labor legislation and supplemental sources where necessary for all 193 UN countries, we are able to examine what countries are doing to support working families.

1. Leave for New Parents

One of the most significant and transformative events in a young family's life is the birth of a child. It can bring immense joy but also immense stresses, particularly if working women and men need to worry about losing their job if they take leave to care for a new child and earning enough to support their family. The newborn period is crucial for a child's brain development and the greatest risks for morbidity and mortality come very early in life. As well, this time is critical for the development of attachment and bonding between parent and child.[5]

Making paid leave available to new parents is an important way to ensure that they are able to spend time with their children during infancy. A wealth of evidence confirms that parental leave significantly improves infant and child health – and that it is critical that this leave be paid. Our study of paid leave for new mothers in 141 countries around the world showed that an increase in this leave by 10 paid full-time equivalent weeks is associated with 9 to 10 percent lower neonatal mortality, infant mortality, and under-five mortality rates.[6] That paid leave for new parents benefits children's health even in high-income countries where morbidity and mortality risks are generally low has been confirmed by studies in the OECD, Europe, and Australia.[7] However, for this leave to be meaningful, it must be paid so that all parents can afford to take advantage of it.[8]

Where Does the World Stand?

The world has come a long way when it comes to paid leave for new mothers – out of 184 countries on which we have data, just 6 countries (the United States, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Samoa, and Papua New Guinea) do not provide at least some paid time off for women upon the birth of a child. Many countries provide more than three months of leave – 60 countries provide between 14 and 25 weeks of paid leave, and 41 countries (the majority in Europe) provide 6 months or more of leave when combining both maternity and parental leave entitlements. However, the situation is radically different when it comes to new fathers. Just 54 countries provide paid leave specifically for fathers, and 42 of these countries provide two weeks or less. Even combining paternity and parental leave, new fathers can take paid leave from work in only73 countries.[9]While some differential may be appropriate when childbirth and breastfeeding are taken into account, these extreme inequities must be addressed.

It is crucial that paid leave be made available to new fathers as well as new mothers. Women should not be penalized in their working lives for bearing children; this makes the provision of maternity leave essential, and most of the world has made this a reality. However, global progress to date reflects deep and enduring gender inequities regarding employment and childrearing. Women are still expected to play the predominant role when it comes to childrearing, while men are denied this opportunity. Failing to ensure that fathers can take leave upon the birth of a child can lead to labor market discrimination against women, and deprives men and their children of this important early interaction. It is also important to ensure that fathers feel free to take this leave in practice. Although parental leave is designed to be gender-neutral, in reality it is overwhelmingly used by women. Fathers are more likely to take leave when it is specifically allocated to men.[10]

2. Breastfeeding Breaks

When mothers go back to work, especially after relatively short periods of leave, their opportunity to continue breastfeeding their baby is critical. The benefits of breastfeeding for the health of infants as well as mothers are significant and well-documented, and include reducing the odds that the baby will suffer from diarrhea, respiratory illness, and other infectious diseases, lowering the chances of malnutrition, and promoting neurocognitive development.[11] If an infant does become ill, the odds of dying from diarrheal disease are between 4 and 14 times higher for non-breastfed versus breastfed infants and the odds of dying from pneumonia are 5 times higher.[12]

How does work affect women's desire and ability to breastfeed? Many women would like to continue breastfeeding after they return to work and working does not change their physical capacity to do so.[13] However, constraints at work can severely limit a working woman's chance to breastfeed. Fortunately, this is readily addressable by policy – giving women the right to take breaks at work to breastfeed or express milk is a straightforward way to facilitate their return to work without compromising infant nutrition options.

Where Does the World Stand?

Our global database shows that 125 countries guarantee women the right to breastfeeding breaks after their return to work, and require employers to provide at least unpaid time for new mothers to express milk or feed their infant. In 105 of these countries, breastfeeding breaks are guaranteed for at least a year. However, dozens of countries do not yet provide this important workplace protection.[14]

3. Early Childhood Care

When parents go back to work, whether after several months or several years of leave, a critical concern is care for young children during work hours. Very few countries extend parental leave until the beginning of school age, leaving nearly every country with a time gap between a parent being home with the child and the child being able to attend school during the day. Our study of working families showed that more than one in three parents had left a young child home alone, and more than a quarter of these parents had left them with only the company of another child.[15]As such, providing high-quality early childhood care and education services (ECCE) is an essential piece of the puzzle.

As well as providing care and supervision for children while their parents are at work, ECCE has been shown to benefit children's development in terms of school achievement, grade repetition, and completion rates from Bangladesh to the United States and Argentina to the United Kingdom. Positive effects on educational outcomes begin at the primary level and in many cases continue to have an impact through secondary school.[16]

However, for good-quality ECCE to be a viable option for all families, especially the most marginalized, it must be available regardless of ability to pay. The families who are in greatest need of care options are low-income families who are least likely to be able to afford it. Data from 21 countries covered by UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys confirms this reality in a wide range of national contexts – the percentage of children under age five who were left home alone or in the care of another child was significantly higher in the poorest families than the most affluent. Among these 21 countries, more than one in ten young children from poor families had been left at home alone or with inadequate care in 20 countries, and in 7 countries, more than 30 percent of young low-income children had experienced this.[17]

Where Does the World Stand?

Unfortunately, as of the present early childhood care and education options are extremely limited in many countries. Approximately half of the world's countries do not have any formal ECCE programs for children under age 3;[18] in the absence of publicly provided ECCE, several years of paid parental leave, or family members available for

caregiving, low-income parents are left with untenable choices between financially supporting their children and providing adequate adult care.

Governments need to ensure high-quality, affordable ECCE options for all children. This need, the expansion and improvement of early childhood care and education, is one of the Education for All goals. While first agreed upon by the international community in 1990,[19] we are far from meeting the need globally.

4. Working Parents and Children's Health

Even after the early childhood period, working parents need to be able to address their family's needs without risking job loss. Beyond the routine care and time with their parents that children require, parents need to be available at particularly critical times. When a child is ill, injured, or needs preventive care such as immunizations, they need to be accompanied to the doctor's office or hospital by an adult. When they are sick and must stay home from school, a parent or other caregiver needs to be available to look after them. As well as the logistical reasons for an adult to be present when a child needs care, parental involvement can improve a child's health outcomes. For out-patient procedures, hospitalization, chronic health problems, and mental and emotional health conditions, children's outcomes improve when parents can be involved in their care.[20]

Work can present a barrier to meeting children's health needs – in contexts as diverse as Haiti, Indonesia, and the United States, work schedules have been found to interfere with parents' ability to have their children vaccinated.[21] If a parent does not have the right to take time off from work to care for a sick child, they may face untenable choices between leaving a child home alone or failing to reach the care they need on one hand, and job loss on the other hand. Our in-depth study of working parents around the world highlighted the consequences of these choices – depending on the country, between 28% and 62% of parents had lost pay, missed out on job promotions, or had difficulty retaining their jobs because of their need to care for sick children.[22]

Where Does the World Stand?

Our data reveal that in most of the world, mothers and fathers risk losing their jobs if they take time off from work to care for a sick child. Only 49 countries guarantee working parents paid leave specifically to meet their children's health needs, and 16 countries provide unpaid leave, which protects parents from job loss but means that low-income parents may not be able to afford to take leave.

There are other types of leave that may be used to meet a child's health needs. Some countries have legislated leave for family needs that can be taken for a variety of family or household reasons, specified to a greater or lesser extent depending on the country. Thirteen countries provide paid leave for family needs, and 6 countries provide unpaid leave. Discretionary leave is guaranteed in even more general terms, and can be taken as the employee deems necessary. In 10 countries, paid discretionary leave is

legislated, and in 7 countries, unpaid discretionary leave is guaranteed. Even combining leave specifically for a child's needs with family or discretionary leave, just 67 countries provide paid leave and 19 unpaid leave that can be taken to meet a child's health needs.[23]

5. Working Parents and Children's Education

Parental involvement has an important effect on children's educational outcomes. Studies in the United States and United Kingdom have shown that primary school students' school achievement is better among children whose parents are actively involved in their schooling.[24]Similar effects have been documented in Sri Lanka and Indonesia.[25] A study in Africa showed that a child's home learning environment, including the availability of someone to help with their homework, was linked to better academic performance.[26]

Most of the time that parents have available to spend with school-aged children is during evenings and nights; work during these hours can impede parents' ability to support their development. With the rise of globalization and the 24/7 economy, the prevalence of evening and night work is increasing. In the European Union, 22 percent of men and 18 percent of women work night shifts, and 9 percent of men and 5 percent of women work nights.[27] In the U.S., close to 15 percent of full-time wage and salary workers work non-traditional hours, including evening and night shifts; the majority of these workers do so because their job requires it and not as a matter of choice.[28]Evidence from the United States, Canada, and Australia shows that the children of parents who work non-standard hours are more likely to perform poorly in school, less likely to be engaged in their education, and more likely to exhibit emotional or behavioral problems.[29]Our study of working parents in the United States, for example, showed that when parents worked at night, their children were nearly 3 times more likely to be suspended from school; additionally for every hour that parents routinely worked during evening hours, their children were 17 percent more likely to score in the bottom quartile of math tests.[30]

Where Does the World Stand?

Parents need to be able to meet with their child's teachers or learning specialists without risking their jobs or incomes. Many fewer countries guarantee leave for children's educational needs than for their health needs – just 5 countries provide either paid or unpaid leave specifically to meet a child's educational needs.[31]

When it comes to routine availability, the regulations surrounding night work are critical. Nations have taken different approaches to addressing and discouraging night work. Some have chosen to ban it for particular groups – our data show that 51 countries around the world prevent employers from requiring pregnant women, nursing mothers, or women with young children to work nights or evenings. While this may provide some protection, it does not address the needs of school-aged children, provides no rights for fathers, and may lead to workplace discrimination against women.

Other countries have chosen to require employers to pay a wage premium to adults working night hours. This approach has threefold benefits. First, making these shifts more expensive for employers may discourage them from requiring these hours unless necessary. Second, higher wages make these shifts more desirable and increase the likelihood that they will be allocated on a volunteer rather than mandatory basis. Third, higher wages make it easier for parents to afford good-quality child care while they have to be at work. In 61 nations, a wage premium is mandated for night work, ranging from 105 to 200 percent of wages.[32]

Can Countries and Companies Afford These Protections?

A common and natural question when it comes to labor protections is, can countries afford to make these guarantees to working families? Will providing paid leave increase a company's compensation costs so much that employers will be forced to reduce their workforce to compensate? Will providing good labor standards put a nation's economy at a comparative disadvantage in the global economy?

On a national level, low-income countries around the world have shown that it is feasible to make these guarantees. Paid leave for new mothers is guaranteed in 50 low-income countries, breastfeeding breaks in 38 low-income countries, a night work wage premium in 18 countries, paid leave for new fathers in 12 countries, leave for family needs in 11 countries, leave for children's health needs in 9 countries, and discretionary leave in 5 countries.

Furthermore, our studies have shown that providing good working conditions does not preclude a country from being economically competitive, nor does it inevitably lead to high rates of unemployment. Using unemployment rates reported by the World Bank for countries around the world, we found no link between unemployment and paid leave for new parents, breastfeeding breaks at work, paid time off to care for personal or family health needs, or a number of other work protections. Looking closer at OECD countries, we selected the 13 countries that had the lowest unemployment rates in at least eight of the 10 countries between 1998 and 2007 and examined the work protections they provide. In 12 of these 13 countries, paid leave for new mothers is guaranteed; 9 of these countries provide paid leave for new fathers; and 11 provide paid leave that can be used to address a child's health needs. The overwhelming majority also mandate other protections, such as wage premiums for night work and annual leave.[33]

To examine whether decent working conditions impede economic competitiveness, we analyzed the World Economic Forum's annual rankings of national economic competitiveness to select the countries that were ranked among the 20 most competitive economies in at least eight of the 10 years between 1999 and 2008. Again, these successful economies overwhelmingly provide supports for working families: 14 of these 15 countries provide paid leave for new mothers, 13 guarantee paid leave for new fathers, and all 15 mandate either paid or unpaid leave that can be used to address children's health needs.

Clearly, economic and financial concerns should not impede countries from guaranteeing these basic protections. In fact, providing a floor of decent labor conditions has economic benefits for employers and economies alike. For example, women who receive paid leave after childbirth are more likely to return to the same employer,[34] allowing employers to benefit from the higher productivity of a more experienced worker and reduced hiring and training costs of turnover. On a societal level, providing paid leave for new parents reduces infant and child illness, thus reducing demands on the health care system. Ensuring that parents can take leave to care for sick children increases the odds that a parent will stay home with an ill child[35] and leads to better child health outcomes, also reducing costs required from the health care system. Providing early childhood care fosters the full development of the next generation of economically productive adults.

Recommendations

The policies discussed in this paper are key to ensuring the healthy development of children and families. Maternity leave, paternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, leave for children's needs, and night work premiums are affordable and within the reach of all countries. In order for nations to learn from each other and to facilitate civil society participation in further developing and passing laws and policies in this area, information on progress, gaps, and implementation should be made readily available to the public.

Having laws and policies on the books is an important first step, but alone it is not enough. For these guarantees to truly impact the lives of working parents and their children, they need to be well implemented. Global monitoring of progress and follow-through is an important tool for nations to assess their own progress and for a nation's citizens to press for further action where progress is insufficient.

In order to move forward most effectively, action will be necessary from labor groups, employers, civil society, governments, and international organizations. Coalitions of actors committed to innovation and progress in these areas should be actively supported, building on the important efforts that have already been made. Finally, it must be ensured that labor protections cover all families – this means addressing affordability, accessibility, discrimination, different family structures, and the informal economy.

➔ Monitor and track progress on laws and policies, and make information readily available to key actors.

- Where information already exists, and as additional information is gathered, it should be made readily available to the public. Currently, much information exists only in the form of original legislation and long reports, which cannot be used to rapidly answer key questions.

- This process would involve analyzing legislation and systematically creating a source of comparable and quantitatively analyzable information on countries around the world.
- Where this is not already being done, the UN should monitor and track global progress on laws and policies in each of these areas critical for working families.
- The UN should actively follow up with countries regarding legislation gaps to ensure that countries have an opportunity to provide information.
- Making this information public could involve creating easily searchable and readily understandable online databases, clear visual representations of the state of the world such as maps, and other audio and visual materials.

➔ <u>Ensure that protections cover all families.</u>

- There has been a rise in precarious work situations such as casual, temporary, and part-time employment contracts, through which workers commonly earn less and have access to fewer workplace protections.[36] It should be ensured that protections cover working families in these positions.
- All employers, whether formal or informal, should be required to ensure that a working parent does not lose his or her job because they had to care for a sick child. When it comes to leave for new mothers and fathers, wage replacement could viably be provided through publicly supported social insurance systems financed through taxes or a contributory system to facilitate coverage of the informal economy.
- Policies should cover the full diversity of families (two parent, single parent, non-parent primary caregivers, and extended families)
- Discrimination (Including by ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and other characteristics) must be prevented so as to ensure equal protection at work for all working parents.

➔ <u>Evaluate implementation and impact.</u>

- Current surveys fielded in many countries around the world such as the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), could incorporate questions on services received and other relevant indicators of implementation.
- Implementation data could be used to study the effectiveness of particular policy choices.

[1] This estimate is based on detailed household survey information from a sample of widely divergent countries. S.J. Heymann, *Forgotten Families: Ending the Growing Crisis Confronting Children and Working Parents in the Global Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
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