



UN Commission on Social Development – 61st Session

‘Creating full and productive employment and decent work for all as a way of overcoming inequalities to accelerate the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’

Mothers and decent work

Statistics show that women are more often discriminated against in the world of work than men. These inequalities are exacerbated for mothers. Indeed, they remain the main person responsible for unpaid domestic and care work, and have to juggle family life with paid work, all too often paying a price for assuming their multiple roles.

What is the current situation for mothers in the world of work?

- Discrimination in accessing the labour force, promotion and career development
- More precarious contracts, more part-time work as compared to other groups of people
- Jobs in low-value sectors of activity (cleaning, catering, manual production work, etc.)
- Lower pay for work of equal value or equal skills - for example, in France, while the wage difference between women without children and men is estimated at 0.4%, the wage difference between a woman with at least one child and men jumps to 12.4%¹; this pattern, although variable in its proportions, can be observed in all European countries
- High rate of informal work and therefore no social protection coverage

What are the particular obstacles related to pregnancy, childcare responsibilities and domestic work?

- A disproportionate share of unpaid family care work (globally more than 76% of unpaid domestic work in the home is done by women), which is at the root of gender inequalities
- A lack of childcare facilities for young children, and/or their cost, which are a barrier to employment
- The need to reduce working hours to accommodate childcare and schooling
- Lack of education and professional skills following early drop-out of school due to early pregnancies

These work challenges, the inability to get a proper pay, and the need to balance family and professional life are particularly acute for single mothers – a situation which is increasingly prevalent, for a variety of reasons: a partner leaving home because of conflict or the necessity to find a job in another region or another country, widowhood, etc.). In the Kibera ghetto in Kenya, for example, 60% of the mothers interviewed said they no longer had a partner at home².

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the ‘motherhood penalty’ on the labour market, and it has thrown many out of the labour force and into a situation of poverty. Many mothers have been forced to quit their jobs as they have had to face the closure of schools and childcare facilities. The

¹ <https://www.leparisien.fr/laparisienne/actualites/interactif-les-francaises-sans-enfant-sont-mieux-payees-que-les-mamans-18-05-2016-5807061.php> - Article based on data from Glassdoor Economic Research

² Survey performed in June 2022 by the association Project Kenya among 50 mothers living in the slum of Kibera, Kenya

slowdown in the global economy has also resulted in a loss of jobs where women are over-represented (cleaning, hotel and catering, and to a lesser extent, manufacturing).

Covid-19 has also exacerbated the gap between advanced economies- which have had generous public support policies, and where people could be vaccinated - and developing countries.

In addition, recent conflicts and the current economic and environmental crises have increased the cost of living for families, and reduced access to basic necessities, leading to a general increase in poverty levels. Access to a second decent wage in the home has become ever more necessary - also in view of growing job insecurities.

Recognising unpaid care work

Reducing inequalities, in particular gender inequalities, requires us to address the issue of the inequitable distribution of the unpaid work of caring for dependent members of families, beginning with children. Reducing inequalities means recognising unpaid family care work as work in its own right, a work that is essential for the functioning of the economy and society.

The ILO has recognised unpaid care work as work that should be measured as part of labour statistics³. Its measurement is part of the 2030 UN development agenda, target 5.4. To date, many States have yet to conduct the necessary time-use surveys and integrate this indicator into their statistics.

Recognising the value and essential nature of unpaid care work, and framing it as a collective responsibility will foster the implementation of supporting policies, appropriate public investments, and compensation measures for those who have to do it.

Redistributing unpaid care work

All over the world, the vast majority of unpaid care work falls on the shoulder of mothers. Recognizing this work can support the right of mothers to make life choices and fulfil their personal aspirations – to choose to take time out from the labour market to stay at home and care for their children, or to work full-time or part-time as they wish.

To achieve this goal, a more equitable sharing of care responsibilities is essential, first between men and women, but also across society:

- Unpaid care work should first be more equitably shared within the family, between men and women: in particular, fathers must be made aware of their role and engaged to take on some of the care responsibilities and domestic tasks at home. States can put in place information and incentive policies. This must of course be done at a pace adapted to each country and its culture
- Governments have a key role: in addition to supportive social policy, governments at every level must invest in appropriate public infrastructures and services that reduce the time needed to perform domestic and care work which in turn can contribute to empower women: water, electricity, energy, telecommunications, but also lifelong learning, childcare, transport, health services, etc.

³ Resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization, adopted by the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians in October 2013 - https://www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/standards-and-guidelines/resolutions-adopted-by-international-conferences-of-labour-statisticians/WCMS_230304/lang--en/index.htm

- The private sector is also a key stakeholder and companies must take their share of responsibility: they must develop and implement policies that support workers with caregiving responsibilities, in particular mothers when they return from maternity leave, and support flexible working conditions compatible with childcare and family life, i.e. flexible working hours, voluntary part-time work, breaks for breastfeeding, progressive training courses or adapted career paths. Private companies themselves increasingly see the advantages of such policies, also from a business point of view: employee retention and motivation, increased productivity, etc. An increasing number of organisations also recognize that the time that parents take off work to care for their children is not lost, but actually helps them develop skills, soft skills in particular, that are also of great value at work.

Universal social protection

A social protection floor disconnected from formal employment is essential to reduce gender inequality and poverty, and to give women a minimum level of security so that they can organise their professional activity in tandem with their role as mothers.

Social protection, beginning with maternity protection, should in particular be provided to women both during pregnancy and when they are bringing up their children. It can take the form of allowances or services made available to mothers.

Improving childcare solutions

For all mothers across the world, one of the main obstacles to access decent work or training/higher education is the lack of affordable and convenient high-quality childcare solutions – day care for young children and after school care for older children.

In order to support the empowerment of women, it is therefore necessary to:

- Develop a diversified and accessible childcare offering (allowing families to choose between crèches, nannies, shared care, etc.)
- Allow parents to look after their children themselves through the creation of childcare allowances, accessible to both fathers and mothers
- Adapt childcare costs to household income - States should consider making childcare completely free for the poorest mothers, especially single mothers

Promoting lifelong learning

Pregnancy and childcare have consequences for mothers in terms of the skills they develop, the quality and type of jobs they can do, and career development.

Indeed, in many low and middle-income countries, the age of first pregnancy leads to a de-schooling of the girl who cannot pursue further education and acquire advanced vocational skills. According to the Population Division of UN DESA, each year more than 21 million young women worldwide become pregnant between the ages of 15 and 18, and 777,000 give birth to a child before the age of 15⁴, resulting in immediate school drop-out, when they had the chance to still be in school. This confines them to future jobs that are poorly paid, are often informal, and do not match their aspirations.

On the other hand, some mothers will accept jobs with less responsibility and reduced working hours in order to meet the demands of family life and care responsibilities. These mothers must be given

⁴ Source: Expert Group Meeting - Population, Education and Sustainable Development - Population Division, UNDESA - 6-7 September 2022

the opportunity to bounce back when they have the chance. This requires access to adult vocational training, and lifelong learning systems, which can be arranged in specific structures such as universities or associations, or within companies themselves.

Supporting women entrepreneurship

One of the solutions that enables a mother to combine family constraints with professional life is to become entrepreneur – hence the ‘mompreneurs’ phenomenon. Setting up their own business allows women to control their working hours and organisation. This is true in both developed and developing countries. Globally, the country with the most female-led businesses is Uganda⁵. In a country like France, in 2018 56% of microenterprises were created by women⁶. Women entrepreneurship therefore contributes to the empowerment of mothers, gender equality and job creation⁷.

In Kibera, for example, 28% of the mothers surveyed want to start their own business. The main obstacle is the lack of initial capital to invest in the necessary equipment. They also expressed the need to be accompanied at the start by a mentor or a support structure.

MMM Recommendations

Supporting mothers means supporting children and future generations. This is a fundamental responsibility of States. But it also means supporting a whole dynamic of women motivated to work and participate in the economic and social development of their country.

In order to enable mothers to have access to decent jobs that meet their life aspirations, to reduce the motherhood penalty and maternal poverty, and more generally progress on gender equality, Make Mothers Matter calls upon governments to:

- Promote a fairer distribution of unpaid care work within families, through
 - National information campaigns, supported by governments to promote the sharing of domestic and care work between men and women
 - Support for grassroots associations that promote these messages
- Recognize unpaid care work as work, an indispensable contribution to a country's economy and society, which like any other economic activity must be measured and appear in labour statistics
- Provide a universal basic social security coverage for all mothers, at least from the time of pregnancy and for as long as the children are dependent. In particular, this should include sufficient paid maternity leave so that a child of a few months does not have to be separated from their mother if either is not ready
- Develop and fund affordable high-quality childcare systems that allow families to choose from different childcare options that best suits them

⁵ <https://www.mastercard.com/news/europe/fr-fr/salle-de-presse/communiqués-de-presse/fr-fr/2020/novembre/l-europe-est-la-region-du-monde-ou-les-femmes-entrepreneures-sont-les-plus-susceptibles-de-prosperer/>

⁶ <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/5229846>

⁷ Le développement de l'entrepreneuriat féminin, ILO - Mars 2016.
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---ifp_seed/documents/publication/wcms_183754.pdf

- Provide lifelong vocational training programmes for women, in particular mothers. This can be done through assistance to grassroots associations that organise such training or the development of public learning structures, as well as financial support or scholarships to enable women to enrol in these courses
- Support women entrepreneurship through:
 - training in business creation and management
 - support structures for women business creators
 - credits and micro-credits to launch their activity
 - communication tools and mentorship systems to develop their activity

About Make Mother Matter - MMM

Make Mothers Matter believes in the power of mothers to make the world a better place, advocating for their recognition and support as changemakers. Created in 1947, MMM is an international NGO with no political or religious affiliations, transparently voicing the concerns of mothers at the highest level: the European Union, UNESCO and the United Nations (general consultative status). MMM also federates a network of about 40 grassroots organisations working in about 30 countries across the world to support and empower mothers and their families, and to advance the human rights of women and children.

More information on www.makemothersmatter.org

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