



UN Working Group on discrimination
against women and girls

Call for input on the gendered dimensions of
the care and support system

Make Mothers Matter has long advocated against the inequitable distribution of unpaid family care work and how it prevents women, in particular when they are mothers, to access decent work and fully participate in the labour market, an issue which came under the spotlight during the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, this crisis has shown how foundational both paid and unpaid care work are for the sustainability of life, the functioning of our economic system and our societies. Despite the vital nature and value of this work which is mostly carried out by women, they are penalised are both economically and socially.

This answer to the call for input focusses on unpaid family care work and on the challenges and discriminations that women who are mothers face in order to fulfil their multiple responsibilities and roles, as the primary caregivers of their children, and economic actors and citizens.

2. What national legislation and policies govern unpaid care work in your country?

Please list specific legislation/laws on social security, health, disability, labour, alimony and any other laws and policies that pertain to supporting those who provide unpaid care work (especially childcare, care for older persons and persons with disabilities), including domestic work, as well as achievements and challenges related to their implementation, providing examples.

Examples of such policies may include maternity or parental leave, provision of publicly provided childcare, initiatives to increase the role of men in childcare, support payments for parents of children, child tax credits, flexible work arrangements, subsidies and/or tax deductions for caretakers of family members.

Several countries have recognized **care as a right in their Constitution**. For instance, the Ecuadorian Constitution recognizes since 2008 unpaid care work as ‘productive’ work¹. Acknowledging the value of informal care work is key in order to ensure that care is associated to rights both for caregivers and care receivers. Those rights ought to include basic workers’ rights, including access to social protection, healthcare and maternity protection. The Ecuadorian Constitution successfully identifies that the labour system has to adapt to account for human caregiving needs by providing services notably for child care to help workers balance their various responsibilities.

Regionally, certain policies have been adopted to account for informal and unpaid care work. The European Union developed a strong body of legislation. The **EU Work-life balance directive**², which was adopted in 2019, recognizes the difficulties caregivers may face in balancing the unpaid care work they perform with a formal professional activity. The directive requires member states to

¹ The Right to Care. From Recognition to its Effective Exercise, Laura Pautassi, March 2023, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung – Available at <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mexiko/20270.pdf>

² <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9438&furtherNews=yes>

develop the **right to request flexible working arrangements** to help notably parents balance their family and professional obligations. It also develops the concept of **carer's leave** in Article 6.

In 2022, the EU decided to approach the topic more broadly by adopting a **Care Strategy**³. The Strategy seeks to ensure comprehensive care services across the EU that respects the dignity and the rights of both care receivers and caregivers.

5. What economic and social policies and programs exist to ensure that young children receive quality care? Please indicate the name of any programs that exist, and the relevant ministry/agencies. Do these policies and programs respect the rights and uphold the best interests of the child?

Childcare needs to be accessible, affordable and of sufficient quality. In addition, MMM advocates for having a variety of childcare options available to ensure that every family can find the solution that best fits their need (be it crèche, childminder, or other).

The **Barcelona Targets** established in 2002 by the European Council establish targets on childcare and seek to ensure that the costs of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) do not constitute a barrier to accessing these services. The Targets notably highlight the need to make the legal entitlement to ECCE services coincide with the end of paid maternity, paternity and parental leave. The increase in the provision of ECCE services across the Union had led to a reduction of the gender employment gap of about 7% between 2002 and 2021⁴.

Yet, in many countries, the cost of childcare continues to be a major determinant in the decision of households not to use formal childcare services. In the absence of proper childcare options, mothers tend to reduce their professional activity to compensate for the lack of adequate services. Providing equal access to inclusive ECCE services is essential to break the intergenerational transmission of social exclusion and poverty.

10. What are the eligibility criteria for getting benefits for care work?

- a. **For maternity or parental leave upon the birth or adoption of a child;**
- b. Child support payments (please indicate amount and what % of the minimum wage in your country the amount corresponds to);
- c. Paid or unpaid leave for care of an older family member;
- d. Paid or unpaid leave for care of a sick family member;
- e. Benefits/payments for care of a family member with disability;
- f. Benefits/payments for persons with disabilities to:
 - i) hire assistance services; ii) to pay family members' care.

Most countries have now adopted maternity protection legislation. And over the last 20 years, there have been improvements in terms of leave duration, and the introduction of funding systems of paid maternity leave based on social security instead of employer liability.

Maternity protection as well as parental/carers leaves and other family benefits like child allowances are usually linked to formal employment, therefore excluding mothers who work informally or

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_5169

⁴ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14785-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

independently. The ILO estimates that worldwide 2 billion people earn a living through informal employment. These include 740 million women⁵, as many mothers choose self-employment for the flexibility it can bring.

As a result, only 44.9% of women with newborns receive maternity cash benefits that provide them with income security around childbirth⁶. In particular, for women working in the informal sector, which is the case for the majority of women in most developing countries, maternity protection remains elusive.

This is a serious gap that must be addressed: Maternity Protection is absolutely crucial for women's economic and social rights around childbirth, as well as her future career prospects. MMM therefore advocates for universal maternity protection and family benefits as part of a social protection floor.

14. What policies are there to increase women's labour force participation? What challenges remain to women's labour force participation? Please comment on how different groups of women may experience these challenges based on their intersectional identities shaped by class, race, ethnicity, rural/urban location, religion, sex/gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Some governments have developed policies to increase women's labour force participation and consequently reduce gender inequalities on the labour market. France adopted in December 2021 the Rixain law which seeks to accelerate economic and professional equality. For example, the legislation imposes a 40% quota of women in leadership positions within companies of more than 1,000 employees. It also addresses stereotypes and the suspicion of maternity that too often prevails and hinders women's career.⁷

Some challenges remain in ensuring women's formal employment. Certain groups face particular challenges. In particular, women living in rural areas and working in the agricultural sector are not necessarily paid or recognized for their contribution to the farm. The work they perform is often informal and unpaid, and they therefore do not benefit from the protection induced by formal employment. Additionally, a smaller concentration of services and the distance between the home and these services is sometimes considerable. The question of childcare for instance is important. To compensate for the lack of accessible childcare services, mothers can refuse to engage in a formal working activity to facilitate child rearing.

Lone mothers constitute another group under pressure. They bear a double responsibility on their own: raising their children and earning a decent living. The significant share of unpaid domestic and

⁵ [https://www.ilo.org/media/284126/download#:~:text=Who%20are%20the%20most%20represented%20among%20those%20in%20informal%20employment%3F,-Page%207&text=employment%20for%20men%20\(63%25\),women%20\(58%25\)%2C%20but%E2%80%A6&text=women%20are%20more%20exposed%20to%20informality%20than%20men%20and%20%E2%80%A6&text=Source%3A%20ILO%20based%20on%20household%20surveys.](https://www.ilo.org/media/284126/download#:~:text=Who%20are%20the%20most%20represented%20among%20those%20in%20informal%20employment%3F,-Page%207&text=employment%20for%20men%20(63%25),women%20(58%25)%2C%20but%E2%80%A6&text=women%20are%20more%20exposed%20to%20informality%20than%20men%20and%20%E2%80%A6&text=Source%3A%20ILO%20based%20on%20household%20surveys.)

⁶ <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/key-principles-and-practices-maternity-protection-discussed-ilo-webinar>

⁷ <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/278858-parite-loi-rixain-24-dec-2021-egalite-professionnelle-femmes-hommes>

care work they perform limits their ability to dedicate time for paid work. It therefore precludes them from earning an income through a formal activity.

Ensuring the accessibility and affordability of childcare, granting **universal basic social protection** as well as child and housing allowances are important levers to provide support to mothers and allow them to access the formal labour market.

To facilitate mothers' return to the labour market, MMM also advocates for a **better recognition of skills gained through the work of caring** and educating a child, in particular organisational and life-skills, which are very much in-demand. The EU funds a project that provides free access to an upskilling and reskilling program for new mothers. The Mom Virtual Assistant Program (MAV)⁸ seeks to help mothers gain recognition of the soft skills they have developed thanks to motherhood such as time and stress management, multitasking, effective communication, conflict resolution or problem-solving.

15. Is care included in existing national or regional action plans on advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women broadly? If so, please describe how and provide any relevant references to policies and programmes.

The **European Union's Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025)** recognizes the critical dimension of care in achieving gender equality. The unequal distribution of care responsibilities continues to be one of the main obstacles to achieving gender equality. The Strategy notably mentions the EU's Work-Life Balance directive as an essential tool in achieving gender equality. By improving family leave policies and ensuring greater flexibility at work, parents and notably mothers can better balance their family and working responsibilities. By requiring a minimum duration of 10 working days' paternity leave, the directive also seeks to encourage fathers to take on more care responsibility and move towards a fairer distribution of care within the household: gender equality begins in the home.

16. What policies are there in your country to reduce women's unpaid care work and to promote a more equal sharing of care work between men and women?

Paternity leave is an important lever to promote a more equal sharing of care work between men and women. The EU Work Life Balance Directive (2019) constrains member states to introduce paternity leave. Across the EU, fathers must be able to benefit from at least 10 working days of paternity leave compensated with a minimum amount equivalent to the level of sick pay.⁹

The drudgery of work such as fetching water or collecting firewood must of course be addressed since this kind of work typically compensates for the absence of basic public infrastructure and services.

⁸ <https://www.mav.mom/>

⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9438&furtherNews=yes>

However, when designing policies to ‘reduce’ women’s unpaid care work, it is imperative that it does not come to the detriment of care receivers. It is important to adopt a holistic approach to care and think at society’s level in terms of ‘redistribution’. The unpaid work of caring is essential and valuable; it must therefore not be framed as a ‘burden’. This work – and its associated costs (which for now mainly fall on women through a ‘motherhood penalty’) – have to be shared more equitably between men and women, but also between all actors of society. In the end, everyone benefits from this work and must therefore take its share of costs and responsibilities. This principle of co-responsibility should be enshrined in national legislations.

18. Is there a national plan to develop and/or expand care and support policies in your country?

Uruguay was the first country to develop a National Integrated System of Care in 2015. The system has several components: (1) the development of services such as childcare, (2) the improvement of training of care providers, and (3) the cultural transformation to centre society around care. The system relies on an institutional structure composed of a National Care Board that defines objectives and policies. The Government also created a Care Advisory Committee to respond to civil society’s demand for a formal space to discuss care-related issues with decision-makers. The Advisory Committee reviews compliance and monitors implementation. The System of Care in Uruguay is constructed on the “three Rs” approach of recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work. Recognition starts with proper measurement of unpaid work, the proper recognition of care as a work within the social security system (for example each child adds care credits to pension calculations), and finally the change of mindset to make people aware of the right to care and to receive care. Reducing unpaid care work includes providing adequate, affordable and quality childcare services, care services for dependents. Redistribution is implemented by extending the duration of maternity and paternity leaves and providing proper allowances.¹⁰

Building on the Uruguayan model, other Latin American states are moving towards national care systems. In early autumn of 2024, Chile also discussed establishing a National Care System. The Bill Project “Chile Cuida” seeks to consecrate the right to care throughout the life-course and to recognize the right to self-care.¹¹ This practice should expand beyond the South American region.

21. What sub-national, local or municipal government programs are there that support givers and receivers of care? Are there any exemplary programs that provide childcare, care for older persons, care for people with disabilities? Please include the name of the program(s), local/municipal governments implementing them, and any other information you can share about the programs.

Local governments are key stakeholders in providing support to care givers and receivers.

The municipality of Bogota has for instance developed ‘Care Blocks’.¹² These blocks are located in several areas of the city where one can find municipal services within a reasonable walking distance

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<https://lac.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Americas/Documentos/Publicaciones/2019/10/SNIC%20web%20INGLES.pdf>

¹¹ <https://publicservices.international/resources/news/chile-debates-bill-to-establish-a-national-care-system?id=15388&lang=en>

¹² <https://www.urbanet.info/centering-womens-care-work-bogota/>

(max 20-30 minutes). It means that caregivers do not necessarily need transportation to access health centres, childcare services, schools or parks. Among the services proposed, the municipality also offers community laundry facilities, physical activities, legal aid and high school classes. When mothers take part in these activities, their relatives are being looked after by municipal staff so they can take time for themselves. The benefit of this initiative is felt on mothers who feel they have time for themselves and a right to respite. These 'Care Blocks' have been successful; as of 2023, there were 19 of them in Bogota and two 'Care Buses' to be more mobile across the city.

Some municipalities have also granted proper recognition to care as a right. The 2017 Constitution of Mexico City states in its article 9 that "everyone has the right to care (...) The system shall give priority attention to people in a situation of dependency due to illness, disability, life cycle, especially childhood and old age, and to those who, in an unpaid manner, are in charge of their care".¹³ Mexico successfully identifies the need to support both care givers and care receivers.

In France, the municipality of Ris Orangis in Essonne earlier this year created a municipal status for single parents which grants them special benefits. The status allows beneficiaries to have preferential tariffs on Internet access, to have additional points to facilitate their access to crèches, to benefit from discounts on local cultural and sporting activities, etc. The municipality also wishes to raise awareness among local businesses on single parents' constraints to facilitate their recruitment and job retention. The municipality also builds a residence dedicated to single parents with specific services to relieve them. The structure will provide legal assistance and tutoring for children.¹⁴

22. Are there any community-based programs in your country that support givers and receivers of care? Are there any community-led initiatives that provide childcare, care for older persons, care for people with disabilities? Please include any other information you can share about the initiatives.

MMM federates a network of about forty grassroots associations. With community-based programs they support mothers and children across the globe.

Our member MINE (Mothers Centres International Network for Empowerment) is an international network of self-organised neighbourhood centres that welcome and support mothers.¹⁵ Mothers Centres empower and connect mothers. They are spaces where mothers can practice community parenting and share experiences while also finding time to relax and breathe. MINE has developed more than a thousand mother centres across 20 countries.

MMM also has several members working with and for lone mothers: providing training (e.g. financial literacy, professional, legal and psychological counselling, shelter, childcare services, community support, etc. These include Ahddane in Morocco¹⁶, CeprodiH in Uruguay¹⁷, Fundacion Isadora Duncan in Spain¹⁸, Passion to Share Foundation in Kenya¹⁹ and Single Super Moms in the Netherlands²⁰.

¹³ The Right to Care. From Recognition to its Effective Exercise, Laura Pautassi, March 2023, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung – Available at <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mexiko/20270.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.mairie-ris-orangis.fr/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024-119-EDUC-Statut-communal-parent-solo.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://minemothercenters.org/>

¹⁶ www.ahddane.org

¹⁷ <https://ceprodih.org/>

¹⁸ <https://isadoraduncan.es/>

¹⁹ <https://www.passiontogetherfoundation.org>

²⁰ <https://singlesupermom.nl/>

Supporting these grassroots organisations' programmes and initiatives is also crucial to address Care.

23. Does your government consult civil society organizations in drawing and evaluating policies and their implementation (for example organizations representing care workers, persons with disabilities, older persons)? If yes, which civil society groups are consulted? Through what institutional mechanisms is their input considered?

Governments have to consult and allow for civil society's input in order to design concrete, responsive and targeted policies. The European Union has successfully included civil society in its discussions around the EU Care Strategy back in 2022. When talking about care, mothers should be part of the groups consulted as they are among the primary concerned.

27. What is your overall assessment of the affordability for receivers of care, and wages and work conditions for givers of care in your country? Is there data on childcare affordability, average wages and workplace conditions of caregivers and childcare quality?

MMM encourages the progressive nature of childcare costs to ensure the affordability for all. Adjusting care costs to the level of revenues can ensure that anybody with care needs can have access to it.

The Nordic Countries have developed a policy of universal access to affordable, high-quality childcare. In Sweden, the cost of childcare is set by law. The fee is capped based on the gross income of the family. For child number one, the costs cannot exceed 3% of the guardian's gross income, the percentage moves to 2% for the second child and to a maximum of 1% for the third child.²¹ Ensuring affordable childcare prevents the lowest paid parent, usually the mother, from staying at home and potentially sacrifice a professional career. Accessible childcare infrastructures are essential to ensure women's equal opportunity in the labour market.

As another example, Canada has adopted a 10\$ a day childcare policy, which is commendable. However, the country fails to recruit enough workers because of low pay and lack of proper qualifications. This last example shows that a National Care policy should be holistic, covering both paid and unpaid work. It is also a matter of national priority: if care becomes a national priority, then it must be allocated a proper budget and care workers paid decently.

30. What international challenges prevent the creation of care-focused economies and societies? What steps should be taken at the international level to facilitate a strong care and support system globally?

Our societies continue to prioritize 'growth', productivity and short-term profit over well-being. This approach precludes adopting a care lens. Focusing on care supposes developing a holistic approach to identify the synergies between economic, labour, health and education policies. **Working across sectors** is the only response to the current crisis of care.

It is crucial to stress the **benefits of investing in comprehensive care systems** and the economic and social returns it can bring. Investing in early childhood care and education improves the development

²¹ <https://familyandjob.eu/childcare-in-europe/sweden/#:~:text=Child%20number%20one%20in%20a,four%20is%20free%20of%20charge.>

of children and facilitates their integration in society and their propensity to reach their full potential. Spending on health and notably prevention measures induce great savings for the state when a long-term approach is adopted. Endorsing measures to increase women's participation in the workforce improves their economic autonomy and securitizes the family's income and consequently the quality of life of households. A prospering society is one that invests in its people and thereby creates a virtuous economic and social cycle.

Care should also be considered in a broader meaning and include **care for the environment**. In the context of the triple planetary crises, which disproportionately impacts women²², this consideration is crucial. Governments should repurpose their economic and social systems in order to prioritise the wellbeing of people and the planet in all policy making – with care at its centre, and follow the lead of the few governments that have started to engage in transforming to **wellbeing economies**²³.

32. What areas of policy design or implementation, not covered in this questionnaire, do you think must be considered for creating a better and more just care and support system in your country and globally?

We currently still lack data on mothers specifically. Maternity is often studied from a medical point of view and much less from sociological and economic perspectives. To understand the specific impacts that motherhood has on women and evaluate the specific discriminations and penalties suffered by women who are mothers, one has to invest in research and statistics. For example, few statistics are available on the motherhood wage gap, or on the pension gap and its relation to the number of children a woman has. There is not even a definition on what a mother is, statistically speaking.

Maternity is not solely a private matter, it also has political, social and economic implications. It the unfinished business of gender equality. It is crucial to identify and measure the far-reaching consequences of maternity in order to properly support women who are mothers, address the inequitable share of unpaid care and support work they do and advance on women's rights and gender equality.

²² See the side-event MMM organised on the margins of the 2024 HLPF on 'Mothers, unpaid care work and global crises: connecting the dots' - <https://makemothersmatter.org/envisioning-care-as-a-common-thread-to-global-crises/>

²³ Canada, Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales – see <https://weall.org/wego>