



114th International Labour Conference

Plenary Oral Statement

Across the globe, women continue to shoulder the vast majority of unpaid domestic and care work, sustaining families, communities, societies and economies – also making all other forms of paid work possible.

We all agree that this unequal distribution of unpaid care responsibilities lies at the heart of persistent gender inequalities. However, we at MMM regret that insufficient attention is paid to those who continue to bear the greatest share of these responsibilities: mothers.

Women have increasingly entered and remained in the labour market, often out of economic necessity, but also because they are more educated than ever, and seek financial independence and professional fulfilment.

Yet, the redistribution of unpaid care work that should have come with this shift is not happening – or at least not to the extent that it should. In particular, persistent social norms and unequal expectations around caregiving continue to place a disproportionate load on mothers, who often struggle to balance paid work with their caregiving responsibilities.

Women who are mothers also face specific forms of discrimination, barriers and challenges in the workplace.

The ILO report prepared for this General Discussion acknowledges one such form of discrimination: the “motherhood pay gap” between mothers and women without children.

However, focusing solely on pay disparities is too narrow. It overlooks the broader “motherhood penalty” — the cumulative impact that motherhood often have on women’s earnings, career progression, economic security and overall well-being throughout their lives. For many women, motherhood comes at a significant economic and personal cost.

What does the motherhood penalty entail? It includes:

- Discrimination in recruitment and promotion, as well as harassment related to pregnancy, maternity or motherhood, often compounded by other intersecting forms of discrimination
- Barriers to labour force participation, including insufficient childcare options¹
- Interrupted career paths
- Limited access to leadership and decision-making positions, as mothers are often perceived as less committed or less competent, and are frequently channelled into lower-level or unwanted part-time roles
- Negative impacts on mental health, including stress, overload, burnout and social isolation

¹ Two-thirds of prime-age women— about 379 million women — remain outside the labour force because of caregiving responsibilities. Source: the impact of care responsibilities on women’s labour force participation, ILO Statistical Brief, November 2024 – <https://www.ilo.org/publications/impact-care-responsibilities-women%25s-labour-force-participation>

MMM's State of Motherhood in Europe report² confirms these realities. Among nearly 10,000 surveyed mothers, 55% changed their employment status after having a child, 23% reduced their working hours and 27% reported a negative impact on their careers. The report also reveals mental health challenges: 67% of mothers reported feeling overloaded, while half said they experienced anxiety, depression, burnout or related difficulties.

Our message is clear: advancing gender equality requires explicitly acknowledging and addressing the motherhood penalty in all its dimensions.

Maternity protection, parental leave and childcare policies are essential, but they are not sufficient on their own.

A truly transformative agenda must also include:

1. Recognition of motherhood as an intersecting ground of discrimination, alongside sex, race, age, disability and other factors³, requiring targeted attention and action
2. Collection of disaggregated data to measure and make visible the full extent of the motherhood penalty
3. Policies that challenge gender stereotypes, promote a more equitable sharing of care responsibilities, and encourage men's equal participation in parenting and caregiving
4. Promotion of family-friendly workplaces that support gradual returns from maternity and parental leave, offer flexible working arrangements, and provide additional support for caregivers
5. Access to quality part-time work and job-sharing⁴ opportunities for both women and men
6. Recognition of parenting as skilled and socially valuable work that develops transferable professional competencies⁵

Supporting mothers and families is a collective responsibility.

We therefore call on governments, employers and social partners to take concrete action to address the motherhood penalty, empower men as caregivers, and build workplaces that are truly family-friendly and conducive to gender equality.

Women – and mothers in particular – have long been adapting to the demands of the world of work. It is now time for the world of work to adapt to the realities of motherhood and caregiving.

² See <https://makemothersmatter.org/mmm-state-of-motherhood-in-europe-2024/>

³ The *agreed conclusions* of the both the 69th and 70th sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women recognise discriminations 'based on maternity' – i.e. mainly around childbirth. But discrimination and harassment do not stop when a child turns 2 or 3; the reality is that mothers are discriminated also beyond maternity. Hence our call to recognise *motherhood* as an intersecting ground of discrimination.

⁴ See <https://makemothersmatter.org/job-sharing-a-promising-solution-for-working-mothers/>

⁵ See the side-event that MMM organised on the margins of the 64th UN Commission on Social Development, *Unlocking the power of care: skills, equity, and social transformation*, on <https://makemothersmatter.org/unlocking-the-power-of-care-skills-equity-and-social-transformation/> – see also the research of Lisa Kaplowitz, a speaker at this event, which shows that caregiving builds core workforce skills: <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/why-businesses-should-value-caregivers-now/>