



Contribution of Social Policies in Achieving Work-Family Balance

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I. Why do Work-Family Balance (WFB) Policies Matter?

As a matter of fact, the difficulties faced by working parents in balancing work and personal life are a worldwide occurrence, as lack of time is a significant source of stress for parents everywhere regardless of culture, country, or gender.

Impact on Family Life

Indeed, evidence from different regions and countries reveal similar results about the negative impact of an imbalance between paid work and family care, which itself is classified as unpaid work. Empirical evidence has proven that conflict between work and family commitments has harmful consequences on marital relationships and family life, which includes physical and mental health issues for working parents, a negative impact on child wellbeing and child development, harmful repercussions on maternity and maternal health as well as on motherhood, parenthood, spousal interactions, and ultimately, family cohesion. Actually, one very remarkable finding of a recent cohort study on preconception, conducted by scholars at Boston University's School of Public Health found that work pressure and stress spillover to home, drastically affecting fertility and reduce reproductive opportunities¹.

Impact on Institutions

Moreover, the negative repercussions of work pressures and stress go far beyond how it affects the lives of families and children as it even extends to the institutional level in terms of its negative effects on productivity, performance, job satisfaction, absenteeism and high levels of turnover. Not surprisingly, a large body of knowledge from policy-oriented research confirms that higher productivity correlates with family friendly workplace policies and practices. Primary surveys and case studies point to flexible working hours as having helped with staff retention, leading in some cases to very significant savings in turnover costs. For instance, the results of a Randomized Control Trial (RCT) evaluating telecommuting examined productivity among call center employees at a Chinese travel agency. In this study, half of the firm's workers were assigned to work from home four days a week, with the fifth day to be spent in the office, while the other half spent all five days at

¹ Wesselink, A. K., Hatch, E. E., Rothman, K. J., Weuve, J. L., Aschengrau, A., Song, R. J., & Wise, L. A. (2018). Perceived Stress and Fecundability: A Preconception Cohort Study of North American Couples. *American journal of epidemiology*.

the office. The study concluded that the employees working from home were 13% more productive than those who worked exclusively at the office. Similarly, when workers were allowed to choose the optimal place to work based on their own personal preferences and circumstances—from either home or the office— their productivity increased even more to 22%².

Work Family Balance Policies Do Matter

Therefore, the key message from the empirical evidence is that: Yes, WFB policies do matter and deserve attention. These policies are playing a fundamental role in supporting working parents as caregivers. These policies enable parents to undertake their parenting responsibilities and reconcile the competing demands of paid and unpaid work. This reconciliation is an essential part of the lives of adult family members, allowing them to successfully manage a career alongside the care of their dependents. Evidence shows that the absence of such policies not only negatively affects child wellbeing and family cohesion, but also has serious negative impacts on institutional productivity.

II. A Framework for Work Family Balance Policies

That being said, what kind of social policies contribute to achieving such WFB? And most importantly, what is the ideal policy framework for WFB? The WFB policies framework refers to the set of policies that make it possible for employees to more easily balance family and work commitments, and to fulfill both their family and work obligations. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO)³ and a major body of literature on WFB, these policies are categorized in a framework of four groups of policies. The first three groups are considered explicit policies while the fourth is more general and implicit.

- The first group contains all leave policies, which includes; maternity leave, pregnancy leave before giving birth, paternity leave, long care leave, and most essentially parental leave consisting of both maternity and paternity leave that

² Council of Economic Advisors (2014). Work Life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility. Executive Office of the President of the United States.

³ ILO Policy Development Section (2011). Work-life balance. GB.312/POL/4

allows parents to divide the period between themselves as they prefer in order to care for a child or dependent.

- The second group is made up of childcare services including on-site workplace childcare facilities, affordable public childcare facilities near the workplace, breastfeeding hours, and suitable breastfeeding facilities at work.
- The third group consists of flexible working arrangements including reduced hours, flexible time arrangements especially after maternity leave, part-time options, telecommunicating, career breaks, and remote work.
- The fourth macro level group is related to how policies contribute to the reduction of the unpaid work burden, including integrated school and work hours, reduced transportation costs and time, inclusive schools and day care facilities for children with disabilities, investment in better infrastructure, and inclusive and family friendly societies.

These four groups of policies provide a holistic framework for WFB policies and work life balance in general as well, which is defined simply as the balance that an individual needs to reconcile the time allocated for work and other aspects of life including family, study, personal time, social, and leisure activities.

III. **International Standards**

Is there a benchmark model for the public or private sectors that can be followed? According to the ILO Maternity Protection Convention of 2000 (No. 183), the working woman is entitled to a period of maternity leave of not less than 14 weeks⁴. Although this convention specifies the minimum standards of maternity leave, the ILO does not specify other standards related to family friendly workplace policies such as paternity leave, parental leave, and breastfeeding hours, among others. However, looking at related national policies worldwide and the MNCs practices in this regard, there could be a number of benchmarking models. The following are only a few, innovative examples:

⁴ International Labour Organization (2000). Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183). Article (4).

- 1- Sweden has one of the most generous parental leave systems in the world⁵. Parents are given 480 days of leave per child, from which 420 of these days are paid at a rate of 80% of the salary.
- 2- Another example is Iceland where the parliament is currently discussing a second extension of parental leave to 12 months instead of 9 months with parents who are active in the labor market being paid 80% of their average salaries during the leave. The 9 months' leave is distributed so that mothers could take 3 months' leave, fathers could take 3 months' leave and the remaining 3 months could be shared by the mother or father in any manner that suits them best - on a part time or full time basis⁶. From 2000 to 2018 and through impact assessment tools, these policies demonstrated effectiveness in reducing gender inequality, promoting shared responsibilities, and sustaining equitable rates of fertility—from 2.67 in 2000 to 2.44 in 2016⁷.
- 3- The Civil Human Resources Law 2016 of the state of Qatar⁸ is another example as it guarantees a 2 hour long breastfeeding break that is available after maternity leave for a period of 2 years. The law also allows a Qatari working mother with a child who has a disability to take up to 5 years' fully paid care leave.

In fact, there are many examples not only at the national policy level but also at the level of private organizations and NGOs. For example, Qatar Foundation recently introduced an extended fully paid maternity leave, unpaid leave after maternity leave ends, flexible working arrangements and a part-time system. There are lots of examples of initiatives at the level of enterprises also, such as at the San Francisco-based microfinance organization Kiva where employees enjoy "No-Meeting Tuesdays" that enable them to work from home⁹. Another example is Intel, which initiated the "H2O Home to Office" program, aimed at bringing women back to work from career breaks¹⁰. Another innovative initiative was

⁵ Wells, M. B., & Beranehr, D. (2014). Families and family policies in Sweden. In *Handbook of family policies across the globe* (pp. 91-107). Springer, New York, NY.

⁶ Fotaine, A. (2018). 12 Months' Parental Leave on The Table Again In Iceland. The Reykjavik Grapevine

⁷ World Bank (2018). World Development Indicators

⁸ State of Qatar (2016). Qatar's Civil Human Resources Law No.15 of 2016.

⁹ Tipton, J. (2013). 7 Companies That Let You Work from Home. Forbes

¹⁰ British Council (2018). The Commonwealth: A Network for Now. British Council

launched by IBM to ship breast milk to home during business trips¹¹. In addition, there exists many other such examples across the globe.

IV. Politics of WFB Policies

Yet the question remains, taking into account the effectiveness of such policies at the family, organizational and state levels, why are such policies not generalized and why are so many countries lagging behind where such policies and practices are concerned. The answer is simply related to the politics of instituting such policies, and this situation holds true across the world not only in the Global South or the Third World. For example, the United States has yet to see a federal paid leave policy due to two cultural elements at play in American society - the values of individualism and business¹².

On a related note, why do the resource-rich countries of the Arab Gulf provide more generous policies, particularly as they are some of the wealthiest welfare states due to their high rates of oil and gas production? One important reason is related to taxation. We talked about generous parental leave in Sweden but looking at the bigger picture, we need to also highlight that the Personal Income Tax Rate in Sweden stands at a high 61.85 percent¹³. However, employees in the Arab Gulf enjoy salaries completely free of any taxation, so the cost of leave and other WFB policies is paid exclusively by the employer—whether within the public or private sectors. The demographical imbalance is another element that exacerbates this challenge, as nationals are less than 15% of the total population in the case of Gulf countries such as Qatar and UAE. Therefore, the introduction of such policies needs to include careful consideration of aspects such as social inclusion, affordability, cost and sustainability of policies.

Social Cost of Imbalance

However, regardless of the politics involved, the most important message I would like to convey is that the social cost of not having such policies is much greater. A line of research indeed calculates the social cost of imbalance between work and family lives. A study from Rutgers University's Center for Women and Work found that women who had taken advantage of the US State of New Jersey's paid-family-leave policy were 39% less likely to

¹¹ Wattles, J. (2015). IBM's traveling moms can ship breast milk home for free. CNN Business

¹² Gillett, R. (2017). Most people in America want paid parental leave — here's the real reason the US is the only developed nation that doesn't have it. Business Insider.

¹³ Trading Economics (2018). Sweden Personal Income Tax Rate.

receive public assistance and 40% less likely to receive food stamps in the year following a child's birth in contrast to those who did not take any leave¹⁴. Thus, evidence shows that work-life conflict incurs economic costs for the individual, society and organization with job stress estimated as costing industry in the United States more than \$300 billion a year in expenditures related to absenteeism and reduced productivity¹⁵. Moreover, within a larger study of over 700 firms in the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany, researchers found a significant positive correlation between work-life balance practices and total factor productivity¹⁶.

V. International Commitment Transformation into Nationally Appropriate Policies

Finally, at the level of the international community, there is a realization and recognition of the value of family policies within different platforms including *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which mentions in Article 16 that the family is the fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state. In addition, SDG #5.4 emphasizes the value of unpaid care and promotes shared responsibility within the household and the family. However, what we urgently need now is the translation of this international commitment into appropriate and carefully designed national policies and practices.

On this note, I would like to conclude by stating that I hope that this important summit and other similar platforms can act as advocacy mechanisms for transforming such commitments into reality and making family issues a priority for policy makers across the globe.

¹⁴ Gillett, R. (2017). Most people in America want paid parental leave. Business Insider

¹⁵ European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2012). Family issues and work-life balance. E-Facts 57.

¹⁶ Council of Economic Advisors (2014). Work Life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility. Executive Office of the President of the United States.