The impact of family-friendly workplaces in industrialized countries

Following the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing the following year, the ensuing decade saw the launch of many family-related initiatives focusing on gender equality and work family reconciliation. The rationale for this increasing interest was the recognition that dual-working parents require special support and that, in the absence of such support, gender equality in the workplace cannot be achieved. In several industrialized countries, state and private support for working families, in particular for working women with young children, are composed of a broad range of initiatives. These include flexible working hours, telecommuting or working at home, paid leave for sick children and childcare provisions. In the absence of childcare provisions, part-time work may also help reconcile work and family life.

Some companies have begun implementing family-friendly initiatives. In Australia, in addition to flexible working hours, 35 per cent of labour agreement provisions are extended to paid sick leave and childcare support for sick children and childcare provisions. In the absence of childcare provisions, part-time work may also help reconcile work and family life.

Family-friendly initiatives can be beneficial to both businesses and employees. Research conducted in Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom shows that companies that have introduced family-friendly measures experience significant reductions in staff turnover, recruitment and training costs and absenteeism, and have increased the likelihood that mothers return to work after maternity leave. It is estimated that companies can generate a return of around 8 per cent by adopting family-friendly policies. AMP, a leading Australian wealth-management corporation, estimates that making its workplace more family-friendly has achieved as much as a 400 per cent return on investment, mainly through increasing staff return after maternity leave. However, further research shows that family-friendly policies are more likely to offer parental leave or childcare subsidies, or both, to highly paid employees rather than those with lower salaries. Such policies are particularly needed by low-wage working mothers who struggle with poor working conditions, low compensation and a lack of childcare facilities.

Family-friendly provisions are by no means uniform across industrialized countries. While in some countries parents may take up to three years of leave with some financial compensation, in others paid leave is restricted to the periods immediately before and after childbirth. In Scandinavian countries, employment-protected leave with relatively high compensation rates is an integral part of a family-friendly policy model. In Sweden, for example, working families are allowed 12 months of paid parental leave, to be divided between parents as they desire, provided that only one parent is on leave at any given time. Aided by the right to reduce their working hours until children go to school, almost half the mothers in dual-earner families in Sweden work less than 35 hours per week. Yet, while some countries encourage fathers to take temporary leave to care for their newborns, most countries continue to accept a traditional gender division of labour in which women stay at home, out of the labour force.

The lack of systematic reporting hampers measurement of the effectiveness of family-friendly policies (i.e., how well they achieve a balance between work and family life). While seemingly positive, two challenges remain even in the presence of family-friendly workplaces. First, working mothers continue to be the primary caregivers for their children, experience career interruptions and suffer from the double burden of working within and outside the household throughout their lives. Second, the family-friendly policy model frequently excludes low-skilled and low-wage workers, working mothers in particular, and typically benefits higher-paid workers.

Although remittances sent by migrant workers can bolster household income, the migration of one or both parents can have negative effects on children, jeopardizing their development and well-being. Research from Ecuador, Mexico and the Philippines suggests that children whose parents have migrated can suffer negative psychological effects. In the Philippines, the children of migrant mothers reported feeling angry, lonely and afraid. In other countries, the risks of abuse and trafficking increase when relatives and friends gain custody of children left behind.

Migration may improve women’s self-esteem and status as they are able to assume a key role as providers by sending remittances home to their families and communities. Several academic studies have found an increase in school attendance and an improvement in children’s access to health-care services in households with parents working abroad. Although remittances sent by migrant workers can bolster household income, the migration of one or both parents can have negative effects on children, jeopardizing their development and well-being. Research from Ecuador, Mexico and the Philippines suggests that children whose parents have migrated can suffer negative psychological effects. In the Philippines, the children of migrant mothers reported feeling angry, lonely and afraid. In other countries, the risks of abuse and trafficking increase when relatives and friends gain custody of children left behind.

Migrant women and girls are uniquely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. With a greater likelihood of indenture into low-paid work such as domestic service, migrant women often face human rights violations. An International Labour Organization study reports that half of foreign female domestic workers interviewed said there had been victims of verbal, physical or sexual abuse. When migrants have children in foreign countries they may also face discrimination in passing their nationality on to their children, or, if they are undocumented, may be reluctant to register their children for fear of deportation.

A number of countries have made positive efforts to address migration and its effects on women and their families. In 2003, the Jordanian Government endorsed the Special Unified Working Contract for non-Jordanian domestic workers. The Philippines and Sri Lanka require that departing workers register with the government. Italy’s immigration law provides a number of protections for migrants and their families. However, while migration is moving up the development agenda, the significant implications for children still receive little focus and research.

Challenging attitudes towards women and work

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women guarantees women’s equality before the law and establishes specific measures to eradicate discrimination against women in all areas of their lives, including those related to education, health, employment, marriage and the family. While all but a handful of countries have adhered to CEDAW – albeit with reservations – much more can be done to ensure discrimination does not exclude women from opportunities to work productively.

The workplace must be transformed to recognize the role that both parents play in child rearing, as required by article 18 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Social policies and programmes should be promoted to enable women and men to reconcile their work and