



**LINKING FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES
TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC
EMPOWERMENT**

An evidence brief

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Introduction

This brief aims to present the ways in which governments and businesses can implement family-friendly policies (FFPs) as a means to enhance women's economic empowerment (women's economic empowerment). Women's economic empowerment goes beyond mere labour force participation, to signify movement towards a 'double boon' – which can be understood as a condition in which (a) women have access to decent, empowering work, and (b) unpaid care and ancillary work is redistributed such that women undertake no more than their fair share of the labour of reproducing society.¹ FFPs can contribute to women's economic empowerment in two ways: first, in furthering the decent work agenda of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to ensure that women and men are able to exercise agency and choice² in the labour market; and second, that unpaid care work is recognized, reduced and redistributed.³ This ties in with ILO's 1981 Convention on Workers with Family Responsibilities (no. 156), that made a case for FFPs that went beyond maternity provisions, to include paternity and parental leave – and thereby opened the door for these policies to recognize women's unpaid care work and attempt to redistribute it to men and to the State. This brief also uses the language of 'families' to signify different

types of families, thereby reflecting the lived realities of people in different familial settings across the world, rather than a heteronormative, nuclear family norm. The words 'men', 'women' and 'primary carers' are used, rather than 'mothers' and 'fathers', to widen the discussion to beyond childcare.

FFPs can be classified into three main types: time-related, service-related and finance-related policies. Time-related policies include maternity/paternity/parental leave, breastfeeding breaks, flexible working hours and any other special/childcare leave. Service-related policies include affordable, accessible and quality childcare services, while finance-related policies refer to those policies that provide cash benefits/grants for the care of children or wage replacement. This brief summarizes a global evidence mapping of these three types of FFPs, presenting the current regional spread of such policies. Progress in even the 100th year of ILO's first-ever maternity protection convention (in 1919, no. 3) seems to be quite inadequate. The brief also provides evidence on how these current FFPs are working for women's economic empowerment, and subsequently draw recommendations for FFPs to be adopted and implemented by governments and businesses.

Global trends and situation⁴

Time-related policies: As figure 1 below shows, all 78 countries surveyed offer paid maternity leave provision, with a majority of countries providing between 12 and 17 weeks of leave. It is notable that while many European countries have longer maternity leave (up to two years), this is largely unpaid or at a low earnings rate. On the other hand, slightly more than half of the countries surveyed (56 per cent) offer any paternity leave. Of these, 68 per cent of countries provide less than 10 days of paternal leave, while only 11 per cent of countries

provide more than two weeks (Iceland offers the greatest number of days for fathers – 91 days of leave). Paid parental leave is equally scant – 59 per cent of countries do not offer any form of parental leave. Among those countries that do, seven offer 3–6 months of leave, while 11 countries offer 7–12 months, with European countries dominating this provision. Only eight countries offered more than 18 months of shared paid parental leave – with the Czech Republic, France, Hungary and the Slovak Republic offering 36 months of parental leave.

Figure 1.
Mapping of paid maternity leave in 78 countries

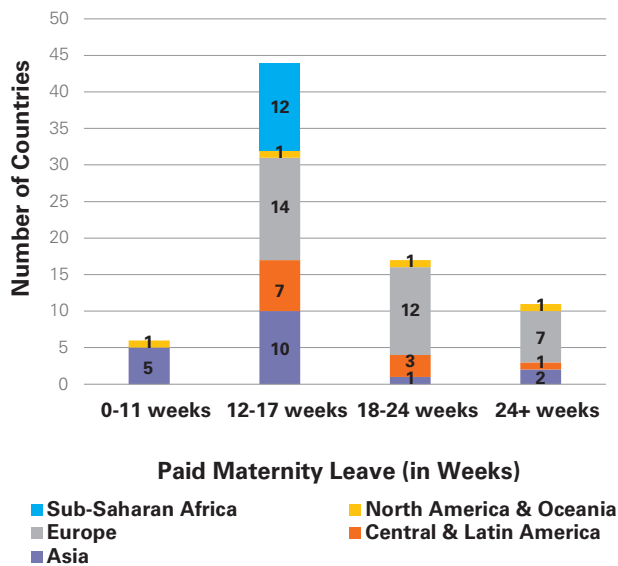


Figure 3.
Mapping of paid parental leave in 78 countries

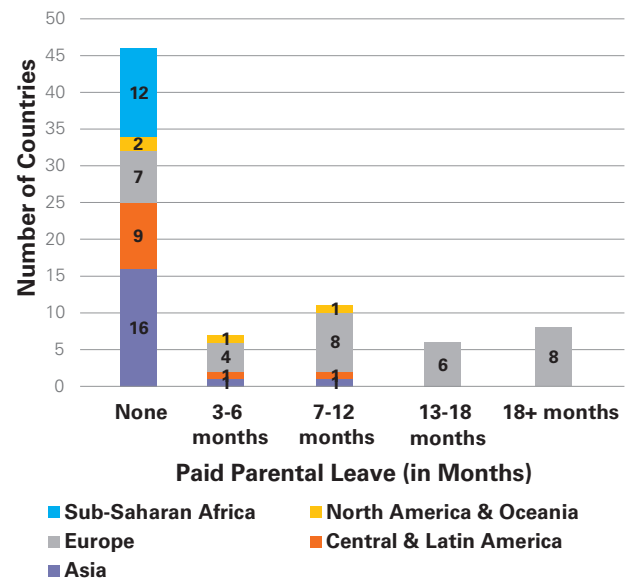
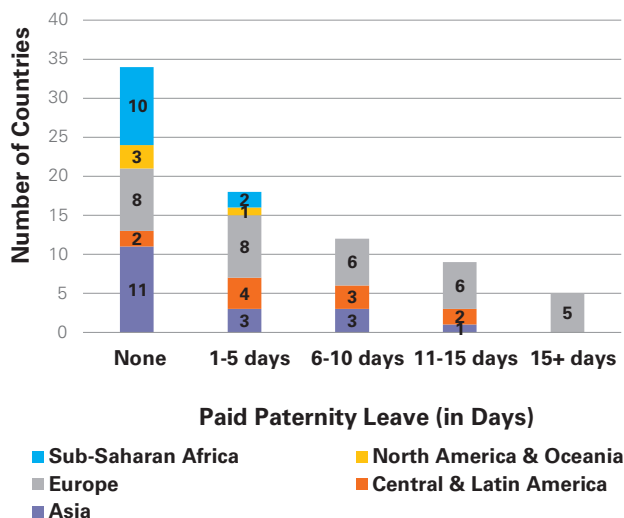


Figure 2.
Mapping of paid paternity leave in 78 countries



Most countries make provisions for employers to provide space and paid breaks within the working day for breastfeeding, but 16 per cent still do not have any statutory provisions for this. Many European countries also have flexible hours, leave to take care of a sick child and provisions to take care of special needs children – though such provisions are scant or non-existent among Asian (except for Japan and Korea), African, and Central and Latin American countries.

Recent and emerging positive changes to FFPs

- Mongolia has given coverage to nomads, herders, rural workers and self-employed workers
- Gender equality bonus and incentives in some countries of the European Union, Japan and Korea to encourage fathers to take leave
- Recognition of rights of adoptive parents, surrogacy commissioning parents, same sex and LGBTQ parents in several countries across the globe
- Only Bulgaria allows leave transfer to grandparents
- Many large private employers in Europe now offer emergency back-up care and subsidized nanny services up to 10–20 days a year
- WestPac Australia offers 12 weeks unpaid grandparental leave
- Slovak Republic, since 2018, provides publicly funded childcare facilities to both employed and unemployed parents.

Service-related policies: In most European countries, there is a well-established principle of universal childcare coverage for all families, irrespective of socio-economic situation. While the provision across different age groups, as well as the extent of coverage (number of hours per week) varies (though largely focused on children older than 3 years old) and is nowhere near universal, full-time coverage, there are recent moves towards providing child care for infants and children younger than 3 years old. Many countries in the Global South, especially in Latin America and South Asia, have provisions for childcare services as employer-led/ employer-funded initiatives, with legal provisions to back these. Interestingly, none of the 12 African countries surveyed had any formal provisions for childcare. Some 31 countries (40 per cent of the countries surveyed) did not have any statutory entitlement for childcare services to be offered by the State or employers. Overall, the picture is one of at best partial coverage for families – which leaves a large proportion of families working either in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) or in informal work (often where there is a concentration of women workers) with no service-related policies being offered either by governments or by employers.⁵ Some public works programmes such as MGNREGA or Rwanda's VUP programme do have provisions for childcare services at worksites, but their implementation remains very patchy and non-exis-

tent.⁶ Quality of childcare facilities remains an important consideration in their uptake too. It was found that childcare facilities are heavily regulated in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and Central Asia, but not in South Asia or sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

Finance-related policies: In Europe, there is a move away from childcare allowances and subsidies towards more investment in childcare services. There is only some evidence of financial transfers in the countries surveyed. Some countries (Australia, Japan, Korea and Mexico) did have income-related childcare subsidies and benefits, but these were linked to eligibility conditions, mainly for poor mothers. India has recently launched a maternity benefits programme⁸ that offers partial wage compensation during childbirth and support for childcare through conditional cash transfers.⁹ Latin American countries have a plethora of child grants, though most of them have behavioural conditionalities attached to them. Unconditional schemes such as South Africa's Universal Child Grants scheme, Nepal's child protection grant, Argentina's AUH programme and Uruguay's PANES programme are notable exceptions, providing families with childcare allowances as a universal provision leading to better outcomes.¹⁰ South Africa's older persons grant helps to support grandmothers to care for grandchildren while parents migrate for work.¹¹

Evidence: Impact of Family-Friendly Policies on women's economic empowerment

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION FOR WOMEN¹²

Service-related policies have a clear and positive impact on female labour force participation (FLFP). Several studies have found that reduced childcare costs have a large and significant impact on the maternal labour supply of mothers with young children (5 years old and younger). These childcare costs are reduced either through highly subsidized childcare services provided by governments or employers, or through tax credit systems and child allowances. This holds in not only developed countries such as the United States^{13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24} but also in Global South countries of Latin and Central America.^{25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32,33} It is also acknowledged that accessibility of childcare for very young children is an important factor for maternal employment, especially among mothers who were not working before being offered free or subsidized childcare in some countries.^{34,35}

However, the gendered effect of time-related policies needs to be carefully considered from two aspects. First, an ostensibly positive focus on long maternity leave, with no commensurate paternity/parental leave, may reinforce the gendered division of care work within the home. Continued lower uptake of parental leave provisions by fathers^{36,37} will have the same effect of reducing the redistributive potential of these time-related FFPs. Second, long duration of maternity leave may also lead to gender imbalances within the workplace, as employers privilege men overall, but especially in non-routine, specialized work, as compared with women.³⁸ Both of these aspects, in turn, impact the potential of women returning to work after maternity leave.

The coverage and amount of finance-related policies remains low for any clear patterns to emerge. There is some evidence to suggest that the size of the childcare subsidy, the number of hours available, the age of children allowed, and the flexibility with which the subsidy can be taken determine the extent and nature of maternal labour supply.^{39,40,41} However, the gendered impact of financial transfers to women is well documented and discussed. Positive impacts on improving access and control over resources, and thereby leading to alterations in gender roles, have been seen in well-designed transfers that recognize and value the care work performed by women.⁴² In other cases, a maternalistic design such as cash transfers with conditionalities may serve to reinforce gendered divisions within the home⁴³ – thereby restricting women's freedom to participate in the paid market economy. Overall, these represent care conundrums where policies aim to reduce poverty instead of effectively addressing the care needs of families.⁴⁴

Finally, there are regressive trends in FFPs that are having harmful effects on women. In many countries, there has been a withdrawal of the state from childcare provisioning. In some cases, such as in the Czech Republic, there has been a substitution of increased parental leave⁴⁵ but in others, this gap remains uncovered – for example, China reducing its coverage for childcare benefits and services; Mexico's roll-back of its federal day-care programme for working mothers. This regression puts the responsibility of care back onto families, and within families, onto women, thereby negatively impacting their economic participation and diminishing the quality of their working lives.

NATURE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PAID ECONOMY

While female labour force participation (FLFP) may ostensibly increase through FFP, a gendered perspective also necessitates looking at the nature of women's participation in terms of choice of work, hours worked, location of work and earnings – all of which have gendered implications on women's well-being.

It is well documented that women choose to engage in informal, flexible and part-time work, so they can combine their paid work responsibilities with their unpaid care work responsibilities.^{46,47} This then leads to reinforcing the gendered labour market segmentation. Studies estimate that more than 129 million women are ineligible for FFP benefits, even when generous provisions exist.⁴⁸ For example, less than

1 per cent of India's female labour force works in the formal sector. In addition, less time at work reduces women's experience and seniority and may weaken their attachment to the labour force. These absences may also contribute to discrimination, as employers expect women to spend less time in the workforce.⁴⁹ Literature also documents the problems for women's work participation in terms of motherhood penalties⁵⁰ as a result of lengthy leave taking. At the same time, parental leave and access to public childcare has a positive association with higher earnings by mothers especially when there is cultural support for maternal employment rather than the traditional male breadwinner/female caregiver model.⁵¹

FFPs that focus entirely on maternity leave are more 'maternalistic' in nature, and reinforce women's role in fulfilling care work responsibilities, thereby leading to adverse gender effects. They are more exclusionary and harder to access for families that do not fit the heterosexual, nuclear family norm, unless specific provisions are made within these policies to cater to differential needs. This highlights the importance of disaggregating different types and intents of FFPs for differential impacts on gender equality, especially for different kinds of families. We found that provisions for single parents were nowhere equal to those for two-parent families, including in European countries. For example, unmarried mothers experience intense work-family conflicts keeping them either entirely out of the labour force or making it difficult for them to maintain job stability.⁵² Similarly, research documents that because of their greater home responsibilities, single parents and women with very young children are at a greater risk of job absenteeism and turnover.⁵³ A package of FFPs that combines support (time, money and services) for women and men as primary carers will have a better chance of effecting transformative gender change.

The amount of benefits that are paid also impacts differentially the type of labour force participation of families belonging to different classes.⁵⁴ We find that the number of hours worked by low-income women residing in slums were sensitive to the price of formal childcare services, pointing to the need for reduced childcare prices for such women⁵⁵ point to the fact that a long-term, low flat-rate home care allowance for care of a child is likely to be more attractive for a lower-earning mother than that for a higher-paid professional woman. Literature suggests that a wage replacement rate of at least 80 per cent is needed to address poverty and promote gender equality in leave-taking,⁵⁶ which is essential for gender-egalitarian outcomes, as discussed above.

EXPERIENCE OF WORKING FAMILIES

In several developed countries, and Europe in particular, childcare provisions are often aimed at early childhood development rather than at women's work or independence.⁵⁷ There is no evidence linking maternity and childcare to improved experiences for families, especially women, in the paid market economy. On the contrary, it is often found that women who take more or longer paid leave may find it harder to get hired or promoted in the workplace.⁵⁸ Mothers taking advantage of flexible work arrangements and reduced work weeks are systematically discriminated against in a number of ways – by either being more often 'let go'; by being less likely to be promoted; and by being less likely to be hired if in childbearing age. These effects are more pronounced for low-skilled and blue collar workers.⁵⁹ Women with care responsibilities are especially hit when they belong to low-skill and precarious or informal work arrangements, as employers differentiate among workers based on skill level.⁶⁰ At the same time, mothers in Australia experience small but significant mental and physical health benefits as a result of government-sponsored paid parental leave, especially if they were relatively disadvantaged (low income, less educated, without access to employer-funded leave, in informal contracts).^{61,62}

Gendered wage gaps among men and women, prevailing social norms which reflect a continued emphasis of care work being 'women's work', and norms of 'male worker' in the workplace make it even harder for men to take up FFP provisions in any effective manner, thereby reducing their uptake. While in Japan, only 56 per cent of men took up some form of leave within two months of the birth of their child,⁶³ in the private sector in France, workplace culture makes it difficult for men especially in managerial roles, to take parental leave.⁶⁴ The Parental Leave Equality Index points out that apart from Iceland, which offers the most generous parental leave to advance gender equity, no other European country has equal, non-transferable or well-paid leave for each parent.⁶⁵ This real or perceived discrimination also impacts reduced uptake of leave among women.⁶⁶ This evidence points to the need to focus FFPs on countering discrimination in the workplace for both men and women as a primary design feature, in order to ensure uptake and impact on women's empowerment. This is especially critical if there is to be any effect of these FFPs to reduce the disproportionate burden of care on women, and lead to redistribution of care from women to men in order to transform gender relations.

Conclusions and recommendations

It can be seen from the above discussion that there is wide variation in FFPs across the globe, and therefore their impacts on women's economic empowerment are equally varied. Lack of coverage is a significant issue for FFPs, leaving a large number of women unable to access any of these policies – either through public or private sector provisioning. While the Global North countries are front-runners in coverage for services, finance and time-related policies, progress among these countries is also patchy. Moreover, there are often gaps between legal provisions and actual implementation of these provisions. While time-related policies are important, FFPs need to consider significant improvements in service-related and finance-related policies – especially for impact on low-income families and informal sector workers. It has been shown that maternity or parental leaves are most effective when they are offered in tandem with high-quality, adequate and affordable childcare services. Legal provisions usually cover only formal sector workers or highly qualified workers, while it is well documented that women are concentrated in informal

sector jobs and in low-skill jobs. Private childcare remains expensive and restricts women in low-income families from engaging in the paid economy. Finally, requirements for employer-led and employer-funded FFPs (especially in the Global South) put strain on SMEs and further restricts coverage, as it puts the onus on the private sector instead of emphasizing childcare as a public good. This highlights the need for governments to step in to cover the low-income and low-skill workforce with quality services and financial support, and also reinforces the State's role for stronger regulation and monitoring of employers.

Further, this brief has shown that FFPs have not yet been focused on gender-transformative change. Most policies still have a maternalistic focus, which serves to reinforce the gendered divisions of labour within the home and within the workplace. Also, many policies are structured for the heteronormative, nuclear family norm, which is not reflective of the reality of other and changing family structures in the Global South. Feminists themselves are sometimes divid-

ed in their own policy preferences: some advocate extended maternity leaves, some preferring parental leave.⁶⁷ It is important to not lose emphasis on either one for the other. Women bear a disproportionate proportion of unpaid care work roles, which arise from dominant social norms regarding gendered division of roles. This in turn impacts the rates of participation of women in the labour force, as well as women's nature of participation in the market economy and their experiences therein. Part-time, flexible work, in locations closer to the home, is preferred by women – thereby impacting their overall empowerment. This is felt more acutely across class divides where women able to avail of cheap, paid domestic help may have separate concerns/support different policy prescriptions than those who are not able to afford this, or are themselves, domestic or paid care workers. FFPs have a critical role in countering these multiple and interlocking chains of disadvantage that women face, in order to ensure women's economic empowerment. FFPs can take into account women's different roles and needs – not just as workers, but also as carers and as rights-bearers,⁶⁸ through moving towards more gender-transformative approaches.

This can be done if **Family-Friendly Policies**:

- Account for a *variety of family forms and non-standard work situations* while designing FFPs – especially covering migrant and domestic workers;
- Consider the *range of roles* that women perform as workers and carers – and the intertwined nature of these roles, both within the family and within the workplace.
- Design a *holistic and balanced package of time-related, service-related and financial-related policies* to provide adequate provisioning, rather than privileging time-related provisions which are easy to put in place, yet may not address the gendered imbalances either within the workplace or within the home.
- Promote a *family-friendly work culture*, including regulated and flexible working hours for both women and men;
- Provide *good-quality*, affordable and accessible services such as childcare – this matters a great deal in their uptake and use;
- *Ensure take-up of FFPs by men*, such that unpaid care work can be redistributed within families.
- Provide *adequate financial support* to all types of workers and all types of families – including social security benefits such as family and child allowances, and tax relief measures. This can ensure a redistribution of unpaid care work from families

to the market and the State, which would be an essential prerequisite for women's economic empowerment.

Specifically, **governments** would need to:

- Institute publicly funded sources for FFPs⁶⁹ – this is critical for their implementation. While a comprehensive package of FFPs may appear 'expensive', acknowledging children as a public good and recognizing care work as central to life is vitally important to socially distribute the costs of this care among state, market, community and household actors.
- Improve implementation of existing FFPs through monitoring, and evaluating these against effects on women's economic empowerment and gender equality.
- Ensure that FFPs cover all parents, regardless of their working status or types of jobs that they do and promoting access to regulated, flexible working hours and part-time opportunities.
- Consider leave policies to care for other family members (long-term and emergency care), alongside childcare.
- Make provisions to support SMEs in providing FFPs, as well as regulate large companies, such that FFP benefits are not dependent on the worker's length of time at an employer, the formality of employment, or the company's size.
- Not crowd out childcare provisions in favour of cash transfers, or vice versa. Both are essential components of social protection for families. Public services must be found as a complement to private sector efforts.

Private sector companies, for their part, would need to:

- Encourage formalization of employment contracts and slowdown towards increased casualization and precaritization of workers.
- Include the well-being and productivity of their workers in the cost-benefit analysis of FFPs, not only financial profits.
- Offer job security and incentivize FFP uptake, especially for men
- Create an environment free of discrimination – through awareness of rights, recognition of care as a valued form of labour, and allowing workers (both women and men) to strike a balance between paid work and care roles.

Endnotes

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Published by UNICEF
Early Childhood Development
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017, USA

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July 2019