

How are workers with family responsibilities faring in the workplace?

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Preface

The year 2004 is the 10th Anniversary of the Year of the Family and, thus, an appropriate occasion for the ILO to highlight the problems of workers with family responsibilities. Since the adoption in 1981 of Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, changes in the family and in the work environment have increased the importance of addressing the strains and discriminations being faced by adults as they try to earn a decent living while coping with their family responsibilities.

As noted by the Director-General of the ILO, “For people living in poverty, discrimination and multiple deprivations cumulate to create a cycle of disadvantage”¹ This booklet looks at one particular kind of discrimination — that related to family responsibilities — showing how it can lead to reduced incomes and a vicious cycle of poverty. Based on in-depth interviews of workers in Botswana, Honduras, Mexico, the Russian Federation, the United States and Vietnam, this paper shows by concrete examples how family responsibilities are affecting the ability of parents to get jobs, keep jobs and earn a decent living. The paper thus gives the reader an insight into the difficulties faced in the labour market by low-income women and men with family responsibilities.

It is hoped that this short document will serve as a reminder to all those involved in the world of work of

¹ ILO: *Working out of poverty*, Report of the Director-General to the International Labour Conference, 91st Session, 2003 (Geneva).

the importance of policies and measures which address barriers and discrimination based on family responsibilities and help reduce the conflict between employment and family responsibilities. To mark this 10th Anniversary of the Year of the Family, a particularly important initiative for governments to consider would be to move towards ratification of Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities.

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Background

During the course of the 20th century, dramatic transformations occurred in the nature and location of labour, the composition of the labour force and, subsequently, of families. The percentage of the labour force that is made up of women increased between 1960 and 2000: from 26 per cent to 38 per cent in the Caribbean, from 16 per cent to 33 per cent in Central America, from 27 per cent to 43 per cent in Oceania, from 21 per cent to 35 per cent in South America, from 23 per cent to 31 per cent in North Africa, from 31 per cent to 46 per cent in North America, from 32 per cent to 41 per cent in Western Europe and from 17 per cent to 25 per cent in the Middle East.¹ While these data only let us readily trace the marked movement of women into the paid labour force, equally dramatic changes were occurring in men's labour as men moved increasingly from agricultural to industrial and post-industrial work, and from informal production work and marketing — where they controlled their own hours — to formal sector work, where they did not.

Families who put more adults in the labour force and who moved from the informal to the formal sector often did so to try to earn more money and have a better chance at finding decent housing, obtaining adequate food and clothing, and providing the essentials for their families. At the same time, these transformations meant that there was no longer an adult at home in most households to care for young children and adult family members in need of help.

This transformation occurred in a backdrop of dramatically increased urbanization. Only 18 per cent

of the world's population lived in urban areas at the beginning of the 20th century. But by the century's close, nearly half did, and it is predicted that more than 60 per cent of the global population will live in cities by the year 2030.² Urbanization matters to children and adults alike, because when adults move to cities, they often become separated from their extended families and thus from that source of support. In addition, adults living in cities are more likely to work in the formal labour force — and even those who do work in the informal labour force are more likely to work at jobs where it is difficult or impossible to take their children, elderly parents or disabled family members along with them.

Fundamental new questions have arisen that will determine the sustainability of these changes at a societal level: Who will care for the health and development of children? Who will meet the health and care needs of the rapidly rising number of elderly? How are families faring economically? How are caregivers faring in the workplace? How will workplaces continue to be productive and thrive, while working adults divide themselves between workplace responsibilities and caring for the health and welfare of family members? How do workplaces, public policies and programmes need to adapt? The goal of the Project on Global Working Families is to answer these questions.³

This document focuses on addressing the following question: How are workers with family responsibilities faring in the workplace? In addressing this question, the paper will present cases from the in-depth ethnographic studies conducted as part of the Project on Global Working Families. These studies included representative samples of urban and semi-urban

populations using public services in cities and towns in six countries in five regions. Over a five-year period, 1,000 in-depth interviews were conducted about the experience of working families in Botswana, Honduras, Mexico, Russia, the United States and Vietnam. This paper will report concrete examples from the in-depth studies about:

- the impact of work and family issues on the ability of parents to get a job;
- the pressure on caregivers to settle for a job with poor conditions;
- pay loss due to family responsibilities;
- job loss that results from poor work-family conditions; and
- the cycles of poverty that result from work-family conflict.

Experiences of working families in five regions

Facing discrimination in applying for jobs

The studies documented that, across diverse geographic, social and economic settings, parents currently have fewer chances to get the jobs they need than adults without children do. Women face discrimination when they are pregnant and when it is known that they are raising children. Men also face discrimination when they are recognized as involved fathers.

In Mexico, 22-year-old Evangelina Alvarez Guzman⁴ described what looking for work had been like. The mother of a 9-month-old son when interviewed, Evangelina explained that the managers she had spoken to thought pregnant women were 'useless': "I think that [the managers] must see our presence as an imposition". She went on to detail one of the experiences she had had while looking for work:

I filled out an application as a teller, and they asked me if I had children. I said, "Yes", and they interviewed me and they asked how old my son was. They didn't hire me. They didn't hire me just because I had a son.

Thirty-seven-year-old Anastasiya Rodionovna Uvarova, who was raising two children aged 16 and 11, told us of parallel experiences in Russia.

If you were trying to find a job, children are regarded as a burden and hindrance, and it appears that I have children only to create

hardships for myself. Because everybody around starts to say, “And what if [he] gets sick? Who is going to watch him? What are you going to do? We don’t need such people.” So if you are trying to find a job, it’s impossible to get something.

In many countries, women felt they had to lie in order to get a job. In Russia, 22-year-old Natalya Antonovna Aliyeva told a prospective employer that her grandmother would take care of her child. She thought it was clear that if she did not lie about the help she would get from a babushka, she would not get a job. “If there were no people who could take care of my child, they thought I would either be always late or take days off or leave the job earlier or come late.”

In Botswana, thirty-four-year-old Mmapula Sikalame had five children, aged 6 months to 13 years. The words she chose to describe her experience while looking for work could just as well have come from women interviewed in a half-dozen other countries.

I experienced problems. When they hire you, they ask questions in the interview like “Do you have children?” and “When you are working, who will take care of the kids?” Since we are desperate for the job, we always say we have a caregiver around or our mother is around — that when we go to work, somebody is around.

Often the statements about having grandparents for caregivers who could help were not true, but the women knew pretending to have help was the only way to obtain work — and they needed the work to feed their children.

Though men less commonly faced employment discrimination, it would surface when potential

employers realized the men would be balancing significant caretaking responsibilities with their work. Humberto Aguayo lived in Honduras with his wife and young son, Humbertocito. Humberto had none of the awkwardness that fathers who rarely care for their infants often do — none of the uncertainty about how to hold a child, how to reassure him, or how to make him content. Nor was Humbertocito ill-at-ease in his father's arms. Clearly, they were completely accustomed to being together. In a neighborhood in Tegucigalpa where many fathers abandon their children, Humberto was at home because he had lost his job while caring for Humbertocito.

Like his wife, Julia, Humberto had been working ten-hour shifts, six days a week in a factory. Julia had to return to work and stop breast-feeding barely six weeks after Humbertocito's birth. Bottle-fed from 42-days old, Humbertocito had been placed at risk for infections that commonly exact a costly toll in developing countries. At age 6 months, he developed pneumonia. The infection was serious enough that Humbertocito was hospitalized for 15 days. Humberto had been allowed to take one day off work to be with Humbertocito in the hospital. When he had asked for a second day, his supervisor had reported him to management. Humberto returned to work on the third day, only to learn that he had been fired, in spite of the fact that he was supposed to have a right under the workplace rules to take leave to care for his son.

At the time of the interview, Humberto had been looking for a new job for four months full-time since being fired. But he had been blacklisted. He had been going from one factory to another searching for a job, but the owners, while hiring other men, just kept

telling him to “come back another day” or “call us later”.

Forced to take poorer jobs in order to care for family

Across national borders, it was repeatedly found that, even when parents living in poverty were able to get jobs, they all-too-often had to settle for jobs with lower pay and poorer benefits than adults without children in order to be able to care for their families. Anastasiya Rodionovna Uvarova’s experience provides just one example. While working two jobs, Anastasiya also cared for her 16-year-old daughter, Mariya, her 11-year-old son, Sergei, and her mother and aunt. Her son was chronically ill, and what little money she made went toward hospital and doctors’ bills.

Anastasiya settled for a poorer-paying job in order to get the flexibility she needed to care for her sick child. But as a result of the lower pay, in the end, Anastasiya had to work two jobs to make ends meet: one as a classroom assistant and another as a janitor. Her earnings and her husband’s factory earnings provided barely enough for her family to live in a communal apartment, where multiple families shared a single apartment and kitchen. Even having accepted a poorer-paying job in order to be able to take leave to care for her son when he was sick, she worried about her ability to keep her job.

Before Perestroika, they did not have such disorder. They could not fire me. I would bring a sick note and, whether they wanted to or not, they put up with it. And now ... if you are trying to find a job, it's impossible to get something. If, on top of

that, your child is sick — God forbid. And my child gets sick. And I have to take him to the doctor.

Anastasiya's experience of having little choice other than to accept a lower-paying job in order to be able to care for her children was common among the other parents interviewed in Russia. After the economic crisis, many government jobs barely paid subsistence wages, that is, when they managed to pay wages on time at all. While private sector jobs paid better salaries, these positions often did not offer even basic labour protections.

Similar stories were repeated everywhere. The income of the family of 38-year-old Faina Sergeievna Demidova fell when she settled for poorer pay in order to be able to care for her children. Faina had held a decently paid job, but she had lost it because of her need to provide care for her children.

I used to have a very nice job. I was a manager of personnel at a prestigious supermarket. One day, my daughter broke her collarbone and I had to stay with her. But I was told that was not a solution, that I must choose: I had to keep on working or be fired. ... That really was an ultimatum: I continue my job without any interruption or I am fired.

There was clearly no choice for Faina, and she left her job. She later recounted the discrimination she faced as she looked for new employment:

I left my previous job and then started seeking a new job. I wanted to apply for posts as an administrator. I was asked whether I have children. I try to convince them that we've got a granny in our family (in fact, there was not any granny of course). I never got a phone call from

the personnel offices of those companies. If you have two children, this is a bad thing for anyone applying for a job. It is a kind of stigma even.

Faina finally found a government job as a packer in a refrigerator factory. But, while this job protected Faina from being fired for providing essential care for her family, the pay and benefits were poor. When she needed to take time off from work to care for her children, she had to compensate by working an additional two hours at night for every one hour of leave she took during the day.

When there is a shorter day in our kindergarten, I have to ask for permission to leave my workplace earlier, and I always must compensate these working hours, working during the night shift. I do not like it at all, but there is no other way. This is the rule in my company. As the mother of two children, I can leave my workplace earlier, and then I must compensate these working hours during the night shift.

Faina described how, when the kindergartens closed early, she would leave work four hours early but then have to compensate by working an additional eight hours. When she had to work the night shift to compensate, her children were home alone. She knew this situation affected their safety and education, since they never did schoolwork when they were home alone in the evenings. But she could not afford a child-care provider.

In many countries, the women interviewed had ended up working in the informal sector — in spite of its frequently lower pay, lower job benefits, and often riskier work conditions — because it provided a way to work while also caring for their children. In Vietnam, for example, 30-year-old Bui Thi Diem was working as

a clerk in a government office when her daughter Mai was born. But Diem could not afford adequate care for Mai on the salary she earned. Mai was growing progressively weaker with the poor-quality child care she received.

She was 3. She was suffering so severely from malnutrition. It hurt me when I looked at her. I did not want to focus on my work anymore. So I had to give up my work ... First of all, the [place where she was in child care] was built in such a way that it was not well ventilated. There were many children but few teachers. The rooms were crowded ... My child had to suffer the difference between our home and the stinky smell there. ... She would often throw up during meals. She would get a fever or a continuous cold or flu. If one child was infected, the disease would spread to the whole group. So my child was continuously sick.

Diem explained: “One of us [either my husband or I] had to sacrifice our work. I took leave from work”. The inadequate nutrition had profoundly affected her daughter’s health and their daily lives.

My daughter’s leg, it was like she was having a handicap problem. But in fact, she was just weak due to malnutrition. She would cry every night to such an extent that I could not sleep because she lacked calcium. At that time, each night, she took her bottle for about five times. She urinated five times, too. So I would be very tired and would only be able to bring her to the bathroom the first three times. The next two times she would piss in the bed.

Diem moved back home to do informal sector work, and now being able to care for Mai at the same time, she no longer had to send her to a grossly inadequate

child-care facility. Her daughter's health improved, but Diem's new work, which involved printing on silk, provided a less-steady income. Moreover, she had no occupational safety protections. "I am afraid that in doing silk printing, I am exposed to chemicals a great deal. I am afraid that in the future, I may suffer from some side effects, because they are all hazardous chemicals." Mai was being exposed to the toxins as well.

Losing pay when providing essential care for family members

Many parents repeatedly lost essential pay in order to care for children. When parents were barely making ends meet, losing several days' wages in a month to care for a sick child could be the difference between being able to pay a food or housing bill and being destitute. In Botswana, Susan Dibe was a 48-year-old mother of eight who, in addition to raising her own children, was helping to care for her three grandchildren. When one of her sons was sick for three days, she lost critically needed pay.

[My supervisor] told me to file for two days off with paid leave. The third day I was not paid. ... There were some shortages. We couldn't do anything. ... I failed to buy some things for my child, like milk. I couldn't pay the water bill. We had to go back to eating sorghum meal.

Similarly, 38-year-old Nguyen Tuong Vi ran short of food for her family when she had to miss work to care for her son in Vietnam. Tuong Vi worked in the formal sector as a cook in a government-owned restaurant,

and her husband was a labourer. Tuong Vi told us about her son's hospitalization for appendicitis:

There was a time when my child had an operation and had to stay at the hospital for a few days. As a result, I needed to take a few days off with salary to take care of him. However, he did not improve, and as a result, I had to continue missing work without salary to take care of him.

There was no choice but to stay at the hospital with her son, who needed care. Tuong Vi missed a total of seven days of work during her son's hospitalization — four of those without pay. She described how four days without pay were too many when her and her husband's combined wages were barely enough.

Whenever I get no salary or just less of it, I eat a little bit more thriftily. When I make a little more money, I eat more. ... I buy a little more food to eat. When I earn less, I just buy less food accordingly, and it's just not as easy as normal ... That's because my company only allows me to have a few days off from work. If I stay home more than that, I won't get my salary.

Some parents lost more than a day's pay for every day they missed to care for a child. Twenty-seven-year-old Bui Kim Tram had a 5-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter. She worked in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, for a Korean bag-production factory, which had a catch-22. In order to get leave, even when a worker or a worker's child was sick, the worker still had to dress in the regular uniform and go to the factory on the day of the requested leave. If the worker did not do so, higher penalties would be deducted from her or his earnings. But going to work first did not make sense when the worker was seriously ill or caring for a seriously ill child. At best, it

meant significant delays in attending to health needs; at worst, the requirement made it impossible to care for sick children. Tram explained what happened when she attended to her children's health needs first:

They didn't believe me. ... They said that I was home doing something else. I submitted the doctor's document, and they knew [my children] were sick. But I don't understand [why they deducted such a high penalty]. For example, on a day that has overtime, I would work from 7:30 in the morning until 8:00 in the evening. I would make 30-something thousand — 36,000 or 37,000 dong. I would sew for that whole day. So if I had to be absent for a day, 40,000 or 41,000 dong would be subtracted from my salary so that I would not take leave. They subtract a higher amount like that so that in the future I would not take leave.

Losing jobs when caring for children and adults in need

Job loss as the result of caring for family members pulled working parents even deeper into poverty. Twenty-four-year-old Naome Gasegale served as a salesperson through most of her first pregnancy in Botswana, and she worked hard throughout the nine months.

My employment has me carrying big boxes of shoes, and the work was really heavy. I used to work overtime, and sometimes I would get off at 10:00 at night. I was very tired. I delivered early because of that. The nurses said that working too hard made me deliver early.

When she had reported pains to her supervisor while she was doing heavy lifting late in her pregnancy, he

told her, “You said you wanted work. Go on working”. When she went into labour prematurely, she was fired for not having given adequate notice — an impossibility, since, clearly, she had had no way of anticipating her early delivery.

I expected to deliver in February. But as I was going for a routine checkup at the clinic, they told me I should stop working because I would deliver too early. I delivered too soon [thereafter]. ... When I got back to [the store], they had found somebody else. They said that I should have told them I would be gone.

The only job she was able to get after giving birth was working as a maid in someone’s home, earning half as much as before as a salesperson — only 320 pula a month, or two dollars a day.

Parents also lost jobs when they stayed at home to care for a sick or injured child, or left work to be with a dying family member or attend a funeral. Twenty-three-year-old Sekgwana Lebala, for instance, worked as a maid in various homes throughout Molepolole and Gaborone in Botswana. Recalling her entry into the labour force, Sekgwana explained: “Poverty pushed me into the street. I had no choice. We were going days without food or water. My mother and father weren’t working, and it was obvious that it was going to be me that had to work”. At the time of the interviews, she was using her wages as a maid to support not only herself, but her younger sister and her own 4-year-old. She noted:

Since I started working, I’ve confronted a lot of problems. But the main one is when I ask for leave. I’ve asked for leave in the past, especially when one of my relatives had died, but I was

never allowed to attend funerals. I was never entitled to a day of leave.

On most days while Sekgwana worked, she left her young daughter in her mother's care. But her mother's poor health limited the amount of care she was able to devote to her child: she simply could not provide adequate care when her grandchild was sick. Sekgwana explained:

My child usually gets sick during the summer. Once when I was at work and I was told that she was really sick that day, I took a radical step: I told my employer that she was sick. It was a Monday, and [my employer] said I could leave on Thursday or Friday. I left immediately. I just came back home until my child got better. This happened in 1997, and when I went back to work, my employer told me to take everything that belonged to me and leave.

She was fired without notice or severance pay. Sekgwana was unemployed for four months before she was able to find another job in a neighboring town.

In the United States, Elizabeth Carter, a 36-year-old mother of three, had a daughter, Lucy, with asthma. Living in poverty, Elizabeth struggled to hold onto a job while meeting Lucy's needs, but Lucy was sick frequently. When working day shifts, Elizabeth would often stay up with Lucy all night in the hospital, and then, sleep-deprived, she would go to work while her mother cared for her daughter. But sometimes, Elizabeth had to miss work in order to be with Lucy. She described one such time when she was supposed to work the night shift:

When I had rushed her in [to the hospital] one night and it was a work night, I had stayed in. Went through emergency and I stayed in with her, just holding her and oxygen and all that ... I just called my boss and said I wouldn't be in, and that's when everything started just going down.

Her boss started to make it progressively harder for Elizabeth to keep her job. Eventually, Elizabeth explained, "It was a choice: either the job or my child, and I picked my child".

Vicious cycle faced by working poor families

As discussed above, the nearly impossible conditions that low-income parents encountered as they sought to care for their family members often led to them losing pay or their jobs. When a new job with worse pay and poorer working conditions replaced the first untenable job, a vicious cycle of declining social and economic conditions often resulted.

Prior to being interviewed, 39-year-old Hoang Thi Ngoc held a job as a middle school teacher in Vietnam. But she worked in a rural community where there was no day-care centre and where she did not earn enough to pay for child care. With few extended family members nearby, Ngoc was largely on her own when it came to meeting her children's needs. She was able to scrape by until they got sick, and then things fell apart.

When I was teaching, I was home half a day, and the other half I was teaching When I was teaching, my son was often sick. He had a kidney disease — *nhiem mo*. He is still sick right now.

Local and district doctors could not diagnose his illness. He was always in discomfort. I had my teaching. I couldn't take time off all the time, [but] when he was sick, I did not teach. I was close to my son's whereabouts. Each night he slept near me. If he became sick, I knew and did not work.

Ngoc went on to explain how in this poor community there were no supports for working or caring for a child:

There was no place at school to bring the children in for breastfeeding. The commune is generally very poor ... not any child-care places in my village. If there were child-care places, I would not have quit teaching.

While there were problems in keeping her job, even when her children were not sick, the starkest problems arose when they were. Ngoc simply summarized: "When my children were sick, I couldn't be near them". Each time Ngoc had to take leave from work to care for her children, the principal took "points" off her record and made deductions from her salary. In the end, there was no way for her to keep the job while meeting her children's basic needs. Like many others, unable to keep a job in the formal sector, Ngoc ultimately landed in the informal sector. Like so many of those we interviewed who similarly ended up in the informal sector or in poorer jobs in the formal sector, Ngoc lost wages and had to endure worse working conditions. At the time of the interview, Ngoc was working seven days a week, from morning until night, both farming and selling rice and pigs' feed in a stall next to where she was living.

In Mexico, 29-year-old Zoraida Serrano went from working as a secretary in a government agency and

having access to health-care benefits to operating a taco stand in a market and having no health insurance or income security. As in Ngoc's case, it was a child's illness that led Zoraida to lose her job.

My son suffered from chicken pox and hepatitis. For that reason I stopped working to take care of him during that time. I had to stop working. ... I felt bad because there wasn't any income.

Zoraida lacked access to both adequate paid leave to care for her son by herself while she worked and adequate earnings to obtain child care while he was sick. "When they told me he had hepatitis and he had to rest, the nursery told me they wouldn't accept him." Zoraida had tried to find other alternatives. She was fortunate that her mother lived near enough to try to help. But her mother worked too, so there was no one who could be with her son in the mornings. After Zoraida had to leave her secretarial job in order to care for her sick son, she began working in a taco stand and took her infant daughter with her. She explained the difficulty of having to cook while holding her daughter and added, "But I think I'm getting used to it little by little. Sometimes they would say, 'No, you're going to burn her' or something, but what I do is carry her with this arm and cook with one hand. But it is difficult".

When families lost jobs in order to care for a sick child or a dying family member, they often experienced months without any income before they were able to find another job, or they tried to survive on lower wages. In Botswana, 32-year-old Dipogiso Motlhagomile was working in construction. She needed the work to support her three children, as well as her cousin who was sick with AIDS. Three weeks

after she took maternity leave for the birth of her third child, her infant died suddenly for unknown reasons, a syndrome described in the West as sudden infant death syndrome.

After her infant's death, the grieving Dipogiso tried to return to her old job, but they would not hire her back. The loss of her construction job after her maternity leave was the beginning of a downward free fall. For nine months, Dipogiso was without any formal work. She cut and sold thatching grass to earn what money she could, but the maximum possible income from that source was not enough for a family to survive on.

At first, Dipogiso's mother used money from her old-age pension to help her daughter buy food. When that wasn't enough, Dipogiso had to leave her children with her older sister. Dipogiso finally found some work as a labourer. But her wage was half of what it had been: it dropped from 600 pula, prior to her having given birth, to 300 pula, or not quite 60 dollars a month. The working conditions were worse as well, and as a result, while cutting bricks, she injured her back so severely that she could no longer continue to work. Though it was a work-related injury, the company would not pay her. She found herself back at home, trying to figure out how to get a job as a household servant, which would involve even lower pay. But to get that job she had to recover enough physically from her injury to be able, once again, to do such basic household tasks as fetching water and sweeping. "I cannot do the daily chores", she explained. "I can't go to fetch water each day. I can't sweep because I can't bend, and I can't wash my clothes."

Even when parents were not fired from their jobs, the risk of being fired weighed heavily on the choices they made. In Moscow, 52-year-old Viktoriya Daniilovna Kozlova was working as a dispatcher for transportation and raising her two sons. She never felt she could take time off to provide care when they were sick, since she feared losing her job in a setting where there was no support for working parents and in an economy where jobs were scarce. “We need money. My child is sick and I would be happy to stay home, but I need money,” she explained. “I cannot even take one day in a week because I’m afraid I will be fired.”

The experiences of the families interviewed around the world as part of the Project on Global Working Families made clear that it was, in fact, the poor who were most likely to lose pay, to lose promotions and to lose jobs in the first place while meeting their care-giving responsibilities because of the poor working conditions they faced. As a result of subsequent unemployment, or landing later jobs with even worse conditions, they were most likely to enter into a vicious cycle of deepening and intergenerational poverty.

The social class disparities existed whether measured by income or education. Parents who were poor — defined as having wage income below \$10 a day (adjusted for purchasing power parity) — repeatedly experienced wage and job loss at work when trying to meet their family needs. Poor working parents were more likely to lose pay when caring for a sick child (49 per cent versus 28 per cent); to lose pay for other care-giving responsibilities (25 per cent versus 15 per cent); to face difficulty retaining jobs because of caring for sick children (15 per cent versus 7 per

cent); and to face difficulty retaining jobs or miss job promotions because of other care-giving responsibilities (16 per cent versus 8 per cent).

Parents who had not completed high school and thus had the fewest job choices consistently paid the highest price for caring for their children and other family members. Those who had not completed high school were more likely to lose pay while caring for a sick child (43 per cent versus 34 per cent); to lose pay for other care-giving responsibilities (23 per cent versus 13 per cent); to face difficulty retaining jobs because of caring for sick children (12 per cent versus 8 per cent); and to face difficulty retaining jobs or loss of job promotions because of other care-giving responsibilities (15 per cent versus 7 per cent).

Conclusion

Disparities and commonalities in experiences

Despite the differences among the countries in which the in-depth studies were conducted in terms of culture, economics, and social conditions, striking commonalities are apparent in the interviews. The individual make each story unique; however, this research suggests that there are clear patterns in the experiences of working parents and their children which are common across substantially varied political and economic contexts and cultures. Parents shared many of the same concerns, whether they were dealing with crises — such as the aftermath of natural disaster in Honduras or the AIDS epidemic in Botswana — or adjusting to broad social transformations — such as economic liberalization in Russia or rapid industrialization in Vietnam. In many cases, the similarities in the stories and experiences are so strong that the quotes from different countries on these topics are nearly indistinguishable after country identifiers are removed.

In every country studied, there were low- and middle-income parents who could not get the jobs they needed because they faced discrimination or impassable barriers as a result of caring for their children. Many parents had to take lower-paying jobs because those were the only jobs that would allow them to care for a sick child or attend to an elderly parent while working. In every nation, there were also parents who could only earn essential income if they limited care for their children. These mothers and fathers thought their families would be worse off if

they did not keep working for the meagre earnings that often barely covered basic food and shelter. However, that decision often came at great cost to their children's future, because their children had to be left home alone at young ages, suffered serious injuries, had health crises that were left unattended, or were pulled permanently out of school — thus damning their future chances — in order to care for younger children in the family.

Policy implications

Many working adults face two fundamental problems which lead to profound economic disadvantages and devastating effects on the health and welfare of their families: discrimination in caring for their families and lack of decent working conditions. An important first step in addressing the discrimination based on family responsibilities was the adoption in 1981 at the international level of the ILO's Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, but ratification by increasing numbers of countries and implementation at the country level remain critical needs.

In terms of fundamental working conditions, many of the worst experiences of working families as documented above could have been avoided if working adults had decent conditions and simple services, including:

- Leave to care for newborn infants and newly adopted children;
- Leave to meet the health needs of children of all ages and dependent adults;

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- Working hours and schedules that allow adults to succeed at work while still caring for family members;
 - Wages that are adequate so the total number of hours adults have to work to survive and exit poverty do not preclude them caring for their families and themselves; and
 - Affordable quality child care and elder care that recognizes that, in the current global economy, it is not feasible for many men and women to provide care solely by themselves.

To date, these basic needs have not been met for a majority of the world's population. But many of these critical necessities have been recognized across nations, political systems, economic conditions and cultures through international agreements and, in particular, in a series of United Nations declarations and treaties and international labour standards adopted by the ILO (see Appendix A).

While these international agreements provide a critical first step, this impressive list of Conventions contrasts starkly with the conditions workers with family responsibilities are facing worldwide, as documented by the above research. While the international agreements demonstrate that consensus can be reached across wide-ranging political, economic, social and cultural contexts, the frequently devastating conditions families face will only change when the Conventions are translated into meaningful legislation that is enforced, policies that are followed, and quality programmes and services that are affordable and accessible to all.

Ensuring these basic conditions should be a priority for employers, governments and international organizations. They are essential to addressing poverty and long-term gender and class inequalities.

¹ World Bank: *World development indicators 2002* (Washington, DC, 2002).

² United Nations Population Division: *World population prospects: The 2002 revision population database*, available at <http://esa.un.org/unpp/>.

³ The Project on Global Working Families is the first research programme to focus on examining the impact of working conditions on the health and well-being of children, adults, aging and disabled family members on a global scale. In addition to the in-depth ethnographic studies used in this paper, the Project on Global Working Families has studies in the following areas:

(a) examining longitudinal demographic, labour and health data that are relevant to understanding the dramatic transformations that are occurring globally in the labour force and in families in addition to the impact of these transformations. These data are being examined for over 150 countries;

(b) analysing existing household survey data on over 55,000 households in seven countries in five regions. The countries being studies include Botswana, Brazil, Mexico, the Russian Federation, South Africa, the United States and Vietnam;

(c) examining relevant labour laws and public policies in over 150 countries.

4 For confidentiality, all names provided in this document are aliases.

Appendix A

Maternity protection was one of the first labour standards adopted by the ILO in 1919. Convention No. 3 provided for paid maternity leave, during which the woman was protected from dismissal and “benefits sufficient for the full and healthy maintenance of herself and her child, provided either out of public funds or by means of a system of insurance”. The current Convention on Maternity Protection (No. 183), 2000, specifies that the period of maternity leave should not be less than 14 weeks, that cash benefits should not be less than two-thirds of previous earnings and that the right to return to an equivalent position should be guaranteed.¹

The importance of paid maternity leave was reiterated in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which has been accepted by 168 countries. CEDAW specifies:

In order to prevent discrimination against women on the grounds of marriage or maternity and to ensure their effective right to work, state parties shall take appropriate measures; a) to prohibit, subject to the imposition of sanctions, dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy or of maternity leave and discrimination in dismissals on the basis of marital status; b) to introduce maternity leave with pay or with comparable social benefits without loss of former employment, seniority, or social imbalances.

¹ See www.ilo.org for details on the specific Conventions.

Formulated as a basic right, paid maternity leave is also covered by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which has been accepted by 145 countries. It specifies that:

Special protection should be accorded to mothers during a reasonable period before and after childbirth. During such period, working mothers should be accorded paid leave, or leave with adequate social security benefits.

Nor has the importance of providing child care been omitted in Conventions. One hundred ninety-one countries have signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which specifies:

States parties should take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.

More broadly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child includes an agreement that:

For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present convention, state parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities, and services for the care of children.

CEDAW, with its 168 country signatories, also underscores the importance of providing child care in order to assure that the rights of children and women are met. It states:

To encourage the provision of necessary supporting social services to enable parents to

combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life, in particular through promoting the establishment and development of a network of child-care facilities.

The ILO Convention on Workers with Family Responsibilities (No. 156), 1981, concerns not only workers with responsibilities for dependent children, but also those with responsibility for “other members of the immediate family who clearly need their care or support where such responsibilities restrict possibilities of preparing for, entering, participating in or advancing in economic activity”. The Convention addresses labour market discrimination against workers with family responsibilities (men or women), while recognizing that the greater burden borne by women constitutes a source of inequality between men and women in the workplace. The Convention specifies:

With a view to creating effective equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women workers, each Member (State) shall make it an aim of national policy to enable persons with family responsibilities who are engaged or wish to engage in employment to exercise their right to do so without being subject to discrimination and, to the extent possible, without conflict between their employment and family responsibilities. (Article 3, paragraph 1)

Rights related to work are also included in the fundamental United Nations Human Rights Accords.²

² See <http://www.unhcr.ch> for details on the specific Conventions.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, accepted, in theory, by 171 countries, specifies that:

Article 23. Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity

Article 24. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

ILO Conventions cover other working conditions central to families.

Conventions addressing the time available to working adults to spend outside of the workplace, including with family

- Convention No. 1, the Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, which provides for a 48-hour workweek.
- Convention No. 14, the Weekly Rest (Industry) Convention, which mandates at least 24 consecutive hours of rest a week.
- Convention No. 132, the Holidays with Pay Convention (Revised), which provides for paid annual holidays of at least three weeks.

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- Convention No. 175, the Part-Time Work Convention, which provides for part-time parity and benefits, such as paid leave, sick leave and maternity leave.

Adequate wages to sustain a family while working reasonable hours

- Convention No. 131, the Minimum Wage Fixing Convention, which provides for minimum wages that take into account the needs of those working.
- Convention No. 100, the Equal Remuneration Convention, which establishes the principle of equal pay for men and women for work of equal value.