

EMPLOYMENT, LABOUR, SOCIAL AFFAIRS

b) State support for families and equality between women & men

Why is state support to families an important concern from an equality perspective?

One function of state support to families is to help ensure the well-being of this basic social unit. Society depends on the family to sustain the daily lives of its members and the continuity of generations. The economy also depends on the family to keep the workforce fed, clothed and in good health and to produce the next generation of workers and taxpayers.

Another function served by state support is to relieve the workload that accompanies raising children and maintaining families. This workload is generally carried by women. It has a significant impact on their work outside the home and their income prospects. Thus state support to families can make important contributions to equality between women and men.

A gender equality perspective on the impact of state policies on families and on the structure of state support to families includes consideration of:

- The **gender-based division of labour in families** that results in women bearing most of the responsibilities for family maintenance;
- The need to recognise that family maintenance activities, while unpaid, constitute **work that requires time, effort and skill**;
- The **interaction between unpaid work in the family and paid work in the market place**, so that factors affecting one have an impact on the other – the “double burden” of unpaid work in the family and paid work outside the home has a major impact on the conditions of women’s lives and on equality between women and men, as women must cope at the expense of their leisure and health or at the expense of trade-offs in their economic activity.

State support to families takes a number of forms, including support services for the care of children and other dependants, cash benefits that recognise some of the costs of providing care, and labour legislation that incorporates family provisions. The impact of such measures on equality between women and men is influenced by the amount of state support (which itself is influenced by macroeconomic policy) and the conditions under which it is available.

Macroeconomic policies affect state support to families and equality

Consider for example the impact on families – and on women and equality – of the cuts to state services pursued in many countries in connection with structural adjustment, deficit reduction, or the transition to market economies.

“Cost-cutting” in health services and hospital care, child care centres and subsidies, and child allowances can mean reduced costs to the public sector but increased costs to families – a shift in costs that is largely borne by women in the form of increased unpaid work to care for children and for family members who are ill or frail.

This shift in costs to women is not evident to policy analysts and decision-makers unless they recognise that unpaid household work is work, and that it is largely done by women.

The structure of state support to families has equality implications

Measures intended to support families can have unintended negative effects on equality as a result of their structure or the way they are financed.

Negative impacts can arise as a result of, for example, targeting services and benefits to mothers rather than parents. Restricting programmes to women reinforces the gender division of labour within the family and women’s disadvantage in the labour force.

Negative impacts can also arise when support to families is financed at the employer or enterprise level, rather than broader tax or insurance-based schemes. Where employers must bear the costs of child care provision or pay for periods of maternity, parental or family leave, they have a strong incentive to avoid these costs by not hiring women. Such approaches reinforce labour market discrimination.

More positive impacts on equality can be sought through approaches that:

- Target both women and men for family-related measures such as parental and family leave and benefits.
- Sharing costs broadly. Consider broader tax and insurance-based schemes for a more equitable sharing of the costs of family support measures.

<p>FORMS OF STATE SUPPORT TO FAMILIES AND EQUALITY:</p> <p>SUPPORT SERVICES that provide some of the care for children and other dependants (which the state may regulate, provide directly, or support through subsidies), in particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ child-care – affordable services of adequate quality for infants and young children not in school; ▪ health care – hospital and nursing care for those who are ill; ▪ care of frail elderly and infirm – facilities and services to assist individuals and the families on whom they depend. <p>CASH BENEFITS that recognise some part of the costs of providing care within the family (direct costs or income losses):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ child allowances or benefits paid on behalf of children; ▪ income replacement for maternity, parental, and family leave. <p>LABOUR STANDARDS LEGISLATION that incorporates family-related provisions to recognise the demands of family responsibilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ anti-discrimination provisions, including protection from dismissal for pregnancy; ▪ maternity, parental and family-leave provisions. 	<p>SOCIAL SERVICES AS AN EMPLOYMENT SECTOR</p> <p>Social services are an important employment sector for women in most regions. This includes public and private sector services for child-care, health care, and care of the aged and infirm. An expansion of services not only supports the ability of workers (and women in particular) to reconcile work and family responsibilities but also can create new employment opportunities for women.</p> <p>At the same time, there are concerns about employment in the social services sector that also require attention from an equality perspective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the predominance of women in the care-giving sectors, and particularly child-care, reflect perceptions that this is “women’s work;” and ▪ the under-valuation of women’s unpaid caring work in the home as work requiring skill and experience is reflected in the low pay that generally characterised these sectors. <p>As a result, it is difficult to attract men to the sector and to make real gains in the relative wages of women who provide the services.</p> <p>Relevant equality commitments in the Beijing <i>Platform for Action</i> include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ measures to address the low wages in female dominated sectors (para. 78(o)); ▪ legislative provisions for equal pay for work of equal value (para. 78(k)).
<p>GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS TO SOCIAL SERVICES THAT SUPPORT FAMILIES, WOMEN AND EQUALITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In relation to women’s effective rights to work: United Nations <i>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women</i>: Article 11(2)(c): “In order to prevent discrimination against women on the grounds of marriage or maternity and to ensure their effective right to work, States Parties shall take appropriate measures: . . . to encourage the provision of the 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.” ▪ In relation to the impact of the “double burden” on women’s health: Beijing <i>Platform for Action</i>, Para. 107(h): “Develop policies that reduce the disproportionate and increasing burden on women who have multiple roles within the family and the community by providing them with adequate support and programmes from health and social services.” 	<p>WORKERS – MEN AND WOMEN – AS PARENTS</p> <p>An important aspect of gender inequality is the lack of perceived legitimacy of the male role in child care, and the role of the worker as parent.</p> <p>Even in countries where men are eligible for parental leave, few take it. A telling observation is that men working in female-dominated sectors (e.g., health care) are more likely than other male workers to use parental leave provisions. On the other side, women working in male-dominated areas are less likely to fully use these provisions than other women workers.</p> <p>Attitudes about the separation of work and family responsibilities – and the anticipated or actual impact of the use of parental and family leave provisions on an individual’s reputation as an effective and promotable employee – will need to be challenged for these patterns to change.</p> <p>Measures that recognise the needs of working parents, and the role of men as well as women in child care, include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ measures that allow leave to care for sick children; ▪ flexibility of hours to allow parents to deal with emergencies, child care problems, etc. ▪ child care centres located close to work places (and the work places of men as well as women).