



**BUSINESS AND
FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES**

An evidence brief

Authors: Subajini Jayasekaran, Ines Kämpfer, Christopher Kip and Berit Knaak

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Introduction

Employment policies can vastly impact the well-being of both workers and their families. The extent to which working parents are able to reconcile work with family responsibilities is increasingly recognized as influencing their ability to provide and care for their children. This is particularly the case for workers in vulnerable situations and low-income families, where children may be at particular risk of being deprived of basic rights and access to essential services. Any discussion on family-friendly policies should therefore consider the impact and influence that businesses, as employers, have on the issue. This brief explores the role of business with regard to family-friendly policies. Specifically, it seeks to understand:

- What are relevant family-friendly workplace policies for businesses and employers?
- What are key drivers for business action on family-friendly policies?

This paper summarizes evidence from literature, as well as new findings from a forthcoming UNICEF global survey of business on family-friendly policies. Acknowledging the gaps that exist in the literature, this brief concludes with recommendations for both governments and businesses to strengthen the adoption of family-friendly business policies.

Evidence

WHAT ARE FAMILY-FRIENDLY BUSINESS POLICIES?

Family-friendly policies are typically defined as those that help to reconcile work and family life.^{1, 2, 3} Yet, while the focus is often on the benefits and the flexibility for working parents, it is important to recognize the contribution that these arrangements can have on the well-being of workers children. For example, a systematic review of literature in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded that paid parental leave appears to reduce child mortality.⁴ A more global review, encompassing low- and middle-income countries, similarly acknowledges the benefits of these policies for children. It notes that paid parental leave can make important contributions to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) outcomes for the health and well-being of both parents and children. For example, paid parental leave has been associated with a reduced incidence of child mortality and low birthweight, higher rates of breastfeeding and immunization coverage, improved cognitive development and school performance in children, and fewer instances of child abuse.⁵

As a result, this brief adopts a child rights lens with regard to the definition of family-friendly policies explicitly acknowledging these outcomes for children. It expands the criteria for family-friendly policies, defining them as those policies which positively impact (a) workers' abilities to reconcile work and family responsibilities; as well as advance (b) the well-being and development of their children.

This brief sketches key categories of family-friendly workplace policies along the three dimensions of time, resources and services. This outline is based on a review of the academic literature, International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, as well as other guidance from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the United Nations (UN) Global Compact and others. Business policies are separated into *family-friendly policies* and *other relevant policies*.

Category	Impact on children	Examples
<i>Family-Friendly Policies</i>		
TIME		
Parental leave (maternity and paternity)	Paid maternity leave is not only a basic labour right but also crucial to child health and development. Paid parental leave is important to allow mothers to recover from childbirth, and for parents to provide adequate care for their infants. It is also critical to promote breastfeeding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paid maternity leave • Paid paternity leave • Paid parental leave • Emergency leave • Care leave
Lactation breaks	Returning to work can be a major obstacle to optimal breastfeeding practices. Lactation breaks during working hours are important means to accommodate breastfeeding or expressing of breastmilk at work. ⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breastfeeding breaks during working hours (e.g., two 30-minute breaks in 8 hours of work)
Flexible working arrangements	Flexible working hours and family-friendly arrangements allow parents to balance work and family life. It allows them to spend quality time caring for their children, which is linked to (early) childhood development (e.g., preventing school dropout). ⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible working times (including teleworking, home office) • Reduced working hours (e.g., part time) • Work sharing, rotation
RESOURCES		
Employment protection and non-discrimination	Prevention of discrimination and arbitrary dismissals based on pregnancy or family responsibilities are critical to provide the social protection and income that parents need to raise their children under conditions of economic security.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment protection (e.g., protection from dismissal) • Non-discrimination (e.g., return to work under the same conditions) • Prohibition of pregnancy testing
Breastfeeding facilities and wider support	In addition to breaks during working hours, a supportive breastfeeding environment (incl. adequate facilities) enables mothers to continue exclusive or complimentary breastfeeding after returning to work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate breastfeeding rooms and facilities (including for the expression and storage of breastmilk) • Supportive breastfeeding environment (e.g., lactation counselling)
SERVICES		
Childcare support	Quality childcare is critical to help mothers return to work, support early childhood development and avoid neglect for children. It can be an important factor to prevent early school dropout, ⁸ whereas a lack of affordable, good-quality childcare can put children at risk of abuse while their parents are working. ⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer-supported childcare (on-site or near-site) • Financial support/subsidies • Collaboration with public sector • Transportation solutions • After-school care • Support for migrant worker families (e.g., summer camps)
Health and safety protections for pregnant and nursing women	Occupational health and safety for pregnant and nursing women is critical to protect the health of mothers and their children (unborn and newborn). This may include reduced working hours, protection from arduous work and prevention of exposure to harmful substances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies and monitoring systems to protect pregnant and nursing mothers from engagement in arduous and unhealthy work • Reduced working hours and workload • Protection from exposure to harmful substances (e.g., pesticides)
Promoting positive parenting practices	Employers have an opportunity to raise awareness and promote positive parenting practices with, e.g., employees, customers and the wider public.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for awareness and information campaigns (e.g., on breastfeeding, early childhood education, participation of fathers)
Maternal health and nutrition support	Employer-supported health and nutrition programmes, especially in countries with poor maternal health indicators, can promote working mothers' ability to bear and raise a healthy child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health services in the workplace (e.g., free ante- and post-natal check-ups) • Provision of food supplements • Awareness-raising and communication for development campaigns

Category	Impact on children	Examples
<i>Other Relevant Policies</i>		
Prevention of sexual harassment	Sexual harassment in the workplace is widespread and can affect not only the victims but also their families. Particular risks exist for adolescents and young workers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies and enforcement to prevent sexual harassment, abuse and discrimination in the workplace • Awareness-raising and sensitization campaigns
Adequate wages	Decent wages at levels sufficient for workers to support their families have a significant influence on parents' ability to adequately care for their children and provide a sufficient standard of living for them to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum wages that are calculated based on the needs of workers and their families • Base salaries that provide sufficient income without need for overtime work • Non-discrimination in salary levels based on, e.g., gender or migrant status
Supply chain and procurement policies	Employers can use their influence and leverage among business partners and within their supply chains to promote family-friendly policies for parents and caregivers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of family-friendly provisions into core supply chain standards, policies, contracts and supplier capacity building

The policies listed above can successfully be combined with broader business approaches to promoting work-life balance of all employees regardless of their status as parents. They can equally support other responsibilities of workers to care for elderly and other family members. The above list is not exhaustive, but reflects what has been identified as potentially the most relevant policies and initiatives to contribute to positive outcomes for children.

WHAT ARE KEY DRIVERS OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES?

There is limited understanding of the scope, scale and drivers of business adoption of family-friendly policies, as there is a dearth of comprehensive data on the coverage of these policies by employers at the country level, let alone global levels. Yet, there are emerging research and qualitative studies that seek to explore how businesses are using these policies, and the drivers of business action. To further support addressing this data gap, UNICEF undertook a survey across 300 businesses from different sectors in different countries (forthcoming). Drawing from the literature review and the findings from that UNICEF survey,¹⁰ this brief was able to identify three key drivers of business action, namely (a) regulation and compliance; (b) productivity, profitability and resources; and (c) values and normative frameworks for business responsibility.

Regulation and compliance

A key driver for the introduction of family-friendly policies is compliance considerations. Compliance considerations for business encompass national leg-

islation but may also include requirements to comply with industry standards, international certification standards, trade union agreements, as well as supplier codes of conduct.

National legislation. According to the UNICEF survey, in all countries studied, companies – from small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to larger enterprises – tend to offer family-friendly policies to the extent that they are in line with national legislation. Business policies rarely go beyond what is required by national law, even when such legislation does not meet international standards. For instance, the ILO recommends a 14-week minimum paid maternity leave, whereas UNICEF survey findings show that employers in many countries offer only a shorter period of leave in line with minimum national requirements. It is clear then that for most companies, especially SMEs, achieving compliance with national law is the goal. Recognizing this as the most powerful driver means that actions to shift the dial on family-friendly policies must integrate changing national legislation as a major priority, which can deliver the greatest change in industry.

International codes of conduct and industry agreements. In the context of global supply chains, an additional driver is compliance with the minimum social standards in international codes of conduct by multinational companies or industry platforms.¹¹ However, there is much debate about the efficacy of these measures, including audit and certification standards.¹² Furthermore, these standards rarely include provisions on family-friendly policies beyond core labour standards (e.g., non-discrimination in the context of family status).

Trade union agreements. Requests and agreements negotiated with unions present another compliance-based driver for the provision of family-friendly policies in businesses.¹³

Productivity, profitability and resources

Some businesses and business stakeholders have reported that they adopt family-friendly policies in recognition of the business case and value to the company.

The business case in relation to gender. Evidence shows that gender equality in the workplace is beneficial for businesses and has been correlated with better corporate performance.¹⁴ But as outlined in the ILO's report on gender equality, a major barrier for women's equal participation in the workforce is the burden of unpaid care work.¹⁵ Many businesses are recognizing that family-friendly policies can contribute to achieving gender equality and thus business profits, by enhancing the recruitment and retention of female employees.¹⁶ On the other hand, there is a risk of the contrary effect that family-friendly policies can result in women being 'mommy-tracked' and not benefit from career progression opportunities.¹⁷

Talent recruitment and retention. There is increasing evidence that workers seek greater work-life balance. This is a global trend that includes women as well as men, and that holds across different age groups including millennials, as well as work contexts from manufacturing jobs to office work.¹⁸ For businesses competing for talent, offering better work-life balance and family-friendly policies can enhance competitiveness to attract labour. This is also true in labour-intensive sectors such as manufacturing and agribusiness. For example, an agro-processor in Kenya, documented in an IFC case study, provided childcare services for workers to prevent labour losses from rural-urban migration.¹⁹ UNICEF data from factory programmes have shown that manufacturing workers in Bangladesh and Viet Nam are more likely to stay in workplaces that implement family-friendly policies. Similarly, programme impact studies conducted by the Center for Child-Rights and Corporate Social Responsibility (CCR CSR) with 44 factories in China have proven that family-friendly policies can be an important factor for increased trust in management and, again, retention.

Improved health, well-being and effectiveness for personal productivity. While the above arguments reflect improved productivity at an institutional level, there is also discussion of improved individual productivity from improved health, well-being and,

therefore, worker efficiency. Paid parental leave has been reported to increase employee morale as well as productivity,²⁰ programmes for breastfeeding in the workplace have been associated with fewer sick children and parents taking less time off from work,²¹ work-life balance policies have been found to improve employee learning and innovation due to increased self-determination and fewer work-life conflicts and stress,²² and programmes targeting women's health have been linked to a reduction in errors made by apparel factory line workers.²³ However, it should be noted that some of the data may be correlational and not attributional, and other studies have shown that not all family-friendly policies have a positive impact on productivity.²⁴

A question of resources: When a business case is not enough. Implementing family-friendly policies has associated costs – whether in hiring replacement labour to provide parental leave cover or the establishment of breastfeeding and childcare facilities. Many arguments for the business case for family-friendly policies seek to calculate the return on investment by balancing investments versus gains for business through lower recruitment costs, lower absenteeism, increased productivity.²⁵ Yet, these are not straightforward calculations. Despite the posited benefits for business, in practice, the lack of implementation of family-friendly business policies likely results from difficulties to quantify their benefits. As noted in one study, benefits are not easy to estimate and often require returns to be calculated over the long term.²⁶ UNICEF's survey of more than 300 businesses globally confirms that the immediate associated costs remain a significant barrier for many businesses to implement family-friendly policies. In particular, SMEs in volatile industries (for example, sectors affected by global commodity price fluctuations) reported finding it difficult to plan ahead and offer their employees guarantees such as paid leave, childcare and flexible working arrangements.²⁷ A study from the United Kingdom notes that during the recession, companies rolled back work-life balance programmes because they were considered too costly.²⁸ This is why guidance on implementing family-friendly policies has emphasized the importance of smart programme design, establishing metrics to measure impact, and identifying levers beyond the business case.²⁹

Values and normative frameworks for business responsibility

A last category of drivers refers to norms and values that companies hold important.

Company values and culture. One non-financial lever for family-friendly policies is the belief that they reinforce company values. Research shows that values can be a strong driver for business action on sustainability issues, and often senior leaders articulate the rationale for their business in this way.³⁰ Values may relate to a company being a 'family' oriented business, or to values of diversity and inclusion, or a company focus on human rights. In one series of studies, researchers demonstrated that contrary to conventional wisdom, 'the persuasive power of the business case' did not prove as effective. Rather, 'when employees used moral language and framed the social issue as part of the organization's values and mission, they were far more successful' in persuading senior management to implement social initiatives related to health, employee treatment, diversity, community issues and sustainability.³¹

Normative frameworks. Normative frameworks, such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, have created significant momentum among governments and the business community in relation to societal expectations for responsible business conduct. They provide a widely accepted standard for businesses in relation to their potential and actual impact vis-à-vis human rights. While family-friendly policies do not feature specifically in the business and human rights discourse, the Guiding Principles nevertheless provide a useful conceptual backdrop for business to avoid harm and promote positive impact through improved business policies and practices. Such frameworks encourage systematic impact assessments and the introduction of processes to measure and implement specific action. For many companies, aligning business policies with the Guiding Principles has included a focus on women's and children's rights.³²

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This brief has sought to provide a snapshot of family-friendly policies from the point of view of businesses, with a focus on defining what these policies are and analysing evidence towards their underling drivers. It has defined family-friendly policies from a child rights point of view as policies that help reconcile work and care, and that contribute to the well-being of working parents and their children. Within this framework, the paper has proposed broad areas of 'core policies', divided along the categories of time, resources and services. Family-friendly policies provided by the private sector include: parental

leave; breastfeeding environment; flexible working arrangements; quality childcare support; employment protection and non-discrimination; sufficient wages; health and safety protections for pregnant and nursing women; and prevention of sexual harassment. Complimentary policy areas were also identified, such as the integration of family-friendly policies into procurement and supply chain sourcing policies; promotion of positive parenting practices; and maternal health and nutrition support programmes.

The brief has explored drivers for change in business policies, concluding that while there may be potential longer-term financial business benefits, among the most important and immediate drivers for change in business behaviour are compliance-based approaches and persuasive approaches focused on values and morals.³³ Investor frameworks, industry standards and international codes of conduct can also play a mediating role to shape business norms and policies.

Moving forward a business agenda on family-friendly policies requires deeper research, and further research on additional questions such as those outlined below.

Equity and coverage

This research brief did not explore key questions of equity and coverage of family-friendly policies. Ensuring that family-friendly policies are accessible to all working parents remains important, regardless of the nature of their contracts, income levels, gender or sexual orientation, or status as minorities or migrants. One study in the United States found that family-friendly policies had limited coverage among low-income workers.³⁴ UNICEF research on palm oil plantations in Indonesia reported that women workers spraying pesticides had temporary contracts and did not benefit from policies on maternity protections and leave.³⁵ An equity lens on family-friendly policies is also important, as these policies need to be meaningful across the spectrum of incomes and workplace realities. It is also important to question how business approaches can advance solutions for working parents in the informal sector or smallholder farm contexts.

Policy versus practice

While this paper presented insights into the increasing significance of family-friendly policies, the practicality of implementing these policies in a variety of workplace contexts – from offices, to factories, plantations, farms, mines and construction sites – remains unexplored. There is, therefore, a need to better understand how businesses are currently implementing these policies, and what the key gaps in implementation are. The design and the 'how-to' of implementing

these policies, establishing robust monitoring frameworks to ensure effectiveness and impact, will all be important in making these policies a reality.

Migration and work

Many industries across the world rely heavily on migrant workers, including palm oil plantations in Indonesia, electronic factories in Malaysia, industrial hubs in South India, construction in Qatar, the mining sector in South Africa or Silicon Valley in the United States.³⁶ Regardless of whether it is national or international, migrant work is transforming the fabric of families globally, often rendering the work and family schism into actual physical boundaries.³⁷ Families may be separated, exposing left-behind children to risks of physical and psychological neglect.³⁸

For migrant workers moving with their families, traditional social structures and safety nets that have typically supported their unpaid care responsibilities may be absent and place additional burdens on workers. In many places, migrant families face additional barriers

to access basic services, as well as an increased cost of living. These ‘personal’ challenges have great impact for employers, as they make the migrant labour force prone to instability and unrest. In this context, some companies are recognizing the need to support migrant workers with their family responsibilities and relationships.³⁹

New technologies, the gig economy and the impact on the future of work

Technological advancements such as automation, big data, artificial intelligence, robotics and the gig economy are already impacting the way many industries operate and compete. The ILO *Future of Work* report highlights how these changes are transforming the future of work – creating new high-skill jobs, but also resulting in job losses for sectors dominated by women, and for low skill workers who may need greater support to navigate changes.⁴⁰ Approaches to family-friendly policies need to be responsive to these transformative shifts to ensure children’s well-being and protect vulnerable work groups.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR

- Implement a comprehensive approach to family-friendly policies as identified in this paper; including other relevant and supporting policy measures.
- Develop robust implementation and monitoring systems to ensure that policies are effective and contribute to the well-being of working parents and their children; and
- Undertake advocacy and champion family-friendly policies to advance stronger government regulation and industry standards; use your leverage to promote better policies in supply chains.

RECOMMENDATION FOR GOVERNMENTS

In line with the General Comment no. 16 on the Convention of the Rights of the Child:

- Implement and enforce regulations and requirements for businesses and employers to advance family-friendly policies in line with international standards;
- Engage all stakeholders to ensure that policy design and implementation are effective;
- Develop subsidies and tax incentives to support business, especially SMEs, with the cost of financing these initiatives;
- Help support the development of business guidance, tools, and research;
- Encourage and support businesses to undertake human rights due diligence with a focus on children, in line with the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights;
- Make policies available and required for state employees; and
- Promote industry-government collaboration to address bottlenecks and deliver family-friendly policy results.

Endnotes

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New York, NY 10017, USA

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