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Dear Readers of 'Families International',

Issue No. 118 has a special focus on Nutrition, especially with regard to children, which is reflected in the proceedings of an International Forum with Dr. Mary Flynn, during our Full Committee Meeting in October 2019, including the effects of nutrition on children's growth.

Further Included are a background note from the United Nations on the International Day of Families 2021, as well as two articles from the International Federation for Family Development (IFFD), a member organization of the Committee, with regard to the ongoing pandemic of Covid19. The final text is from a further member organization, Make Mothers Matter (MMM), concerning digital technologies and their use in family wellbeing. Finally, one can find a list of recent upcoming events regarding families, children and nutrition.

Sincerely,

Julia Birner

Executive Editor

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Dr Mary A T Flynn *'Feed the child and save the world'*

'Feed the child and save the world' – life-long effects of food and nutrition to support childhood growth and development.

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Dedicated to the memory of Ann

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Nutritional issues for children and the role of family

The effects of good nutrition during early life and throughout childhood are extremely powerful. This paper, which describes how these effects last to protect children's health into old age, was presented at an International Forum (held as a virtual meeting in October 2020) of the Vienna NGO Committee on the Family, accredited with the United Nations Office Vienna.

Families are at the heart of nurturing children. Food and nutrition determine how children grow, develop and, ultimately, realise their full genetic potential - physically and mentally. Family members of all ages are powerful role-models capable of inspiring positive food behaviours and eating habits that last a lifetime. Sadly, many children throughout the world lose this family support. These lost children rely on the wider community for family – an area where Civil Society has a critical role.

Stories of circumstances that prevent adequate nutrition during the period from conception to adulthood, are briefly outlined in this paper. These stories describe some of the enormous challenges faced by children to secure food for survival and their lack of opportunity to develop food habits needed for a lifetime of health. These stories, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this paper are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

Ensuring safe, nutritious and sustainable food throughout childhood, from pre-conception to adulthood, by 2030 is at the heart of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But now, at the close of 2020, the human race is besieged by the unprecedented

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emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a crisis of uneven magnitude, which intensifies existing calamities such as the Desert Locust outbreaks in East Africa 2020, crop failures due to climate change, conflict-driven collapse of governmental systems and emergency refugee migration – all of which culminate in severe food insecurity. While different countries face different food security challenges, the burden is always heaviest for children less than 5 years of age. Two reasons explain why these youngest humans suffer most:

1. lack of food easily compromises the enormous cognitive and physical development they are going through; and
2. nutritional deficiencies increase their vulnerability to common illnesses.

Consequently, mortality rates are always highest among this age group, while survivors lose part of their inherent capacity to lead productive lives.

A child cannot determine the best time to be born. A child's growth and development persist relentlessly even in the midst of inadequate food and nutrition. A child's opportunity to achieve their full potential is time sensitive.

The long-term damage wrought by surviving childhood malnutrition while maturing through the most sensitive developmental phases is not very obvious. *Feed the child and save the world* explores the life-long effects of food and nutrition from before conception to adulthood and describes why action on threats to food security for this life phase is always urgent.

Lifelong impact of nutrition during very early life

The world owes huge gratitude to Professor David Barker (b1938, d2013) for his ground-breaking work that linked early 20th century birth records in Hertfordshire, UK, with the health of those 'babies' when they reached 50 to 70 years of age. This research established how malnutrition in the womb, or during infancy and young childhood – intensifies vulnerability in adulthood to cardiovascular disease diabetes, high blood pressure, unhealthy blood lipid patterns and lower bone mineral density.

In summary, if nutrition during foetal and early infant life is compromised, this permanently programmes how the body develops and grows to survive in an environment of inadequate nutrition. This, in turn, leads to an inability to tolerate exposure to excessive dietary intakes of calories and nutrients such as saturated fat or sugar. Such exposure results in vulnerability to diseases associated with obesity (e.g., cardiovascular disease, diabetes etc.). Professor

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Barker's discoveries sparked a surge of research into long-term outcomes of nutrition during pregnancy. Similar evidence on how early life development strongly determines disease patterns experienced during adulthood, is apparent in diverse populations world-wide – including in India, Finland and among famine survivors in the Netherlands during the second world war, and in China, during the late 1950s. This work also demonstrates how the timing of the malnutrition period (e.g., early vs. late pregnancy) can lead to different long-term health outcomes during adult life. All of these breakthroughs emphasise the sensitivity of growth and development during inter-uterine life, infancy and young childhood, in addition to the timing of critical development within various organs.

Pregnancy increases a woman's requirements for several nutrients – particularly iron, calcium, iodine, folate (folic acid) and vitamin D. Malnutrition leading to growth retardation of the foetus during pregnancy, can be assessed in many ways e.g., low birth weight and/or measurement assessments that identify new-borns as being undernourished (e.g., lower weight than expected for length, or for head circumference). Any nutritional issue affecting the mother can compromise foetal growth and development, including a food intake pattern that provides insufficient energy (calories) or insufficient nutrients e.g., folate, iron, iodine *etc.*. Other maternal habits that result in low birth weight include smoking, alcohol/substance abuse and even excessive caffeine intake.

Malnutrition during pregnancy – a worsening global crisis in 2020

As many as 14.6% of infants worldwide were born with a low birth weight (less than 2500g) in 2015 – an estimate that is likely to be significantly increased in 2020 (1). Nearly 690 million people are hungry (8.9% of the world's population) and that the rate of hunger is increasing by 10 million people per year (1). Preliminary assessment of the Covid-19 pandemic suggests an additional 83 to 132 million people may be added to the total number of undernourished in the world in 2020. (1). These hunger statistics include women of childbearing age and many who are pregnant.

Farah's story

The war has brought fear into everything as she struggles to stay alive. Only when she's almost asleep can her unborn child steal into her consciousness. Intimate movements deep inside that should fill her with delight – fill her, instead, with intense longing for the husband who will never again comfort her, keep her warm or find food for survival.

Aware of her pregnancy, others on the journey are kind but have nothing to share. Her thinness has become severe and she feels she is disappearing behind her swollen belly where – in a signal of hope that bewilders her, her unborn child continues to grow.

Many pregnant women survive conflict and migration. Due to insufficient food, lack of healthcare and stress, their new-borns are often of low birthweight. This can carry life-long negative health consequences for these infants. Nonetheless, on-going research¹ indicates such adverse effects of inadequate foetal nutrition can be ameliorated by best infant and young child feeding practices that ensure healthy growth and development (especially during the first two years of life) (2).

While moderate or severe food insecurity is far more prevalent in Low Income Countries (LIC) and Low Middle-Income Countries (LMIC) countries, this also affects 88 million people in High Income Countries (HIC) in regions such as North America and Europe (1). Healthy diets are more expensive which puts those in poverty at greatest risk of poor dietary intakes (3) (4). Iron deficiency anaemia affects a third of all women of child-bearing age globally (1), with the highest rates among those living in LIC, LMIC and those from socio- economically disadvantaged backgrounds in HIC (5). Obesity is also associated with poverty and can co-exist with nutritional deficiencies such as iron deficiency (6). These data emphasise the urgency of addressing the nutrition and health of women of child- bearing age worldwide.

¹ Such research include potential epigenetic effects of food and nutrition at critical developmental phases. In this context epigenetics can be described as how the environment (food and nutrition) may alter gene activity without changing the DNA sequence. While epigenetic changes can lead to modifications in gene activity that can be transmitted to future generations, experiments show that some epigenetic changes can be reversed.

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Julie's story

She left the clinic feeling ashamed and hopeless. She has always been overweight but pregnancy has brought this to a whole new level. With all that extra weight how can the doctor say her unborn baby is too small? She denied smoking – isn't she's always trying to stop! Stopping was much easier when working – but that was so long ago.

She can't afford to go anywhere. Everyday seems endless - varying only with what's on TV. She's never really hungry for dinner - or any other meal for that matter. She just prefers snack-foods.

'Get outside for a walk' the nurse said. The nurse has no idea how unsafe her neighbourhood is.

Disadvantaged women in High Income Countries are more likely to smoke and are significantly more vulnerable to obesity and nutritional deficiencies (such as iron deficiency anaemia). All of these factors complicate pregnancy and affect birth weight outcomes, leading to increased risk of ill health for these infants not only during childhood, but throughout life. Nonetheless, on-going research² indicates such adverse effects of inadequate foetal nutrition can be ameliorated by best infant and young child feeding practices that ensure healthy growth and development (especially birth to two years) (2).

'Best beginnings' for children start by ensuring women of childbearing age are healthy Ensuring optimum maternal nutrition pre-pregnancy provides immense beneficial effects for both mother and infant. For example, ensuring adequate folic acid nutrition before conception, prevents serious birth defects. The effects of good nutrition can also extend well beyond the infant's lifelong health, onto future generations - potentially improving the health of the infant's future children (2) (7). Acting well before conception provides opportunities to address many common nutritional issues (underweight, obesity, vitamin and mineral deficiencies) in addition to lifestyle risk factors such as smoking and alcohol that all impact negatively on foetal growth and development (8). Tackling such issues takes time so ideally population-based programmes should start when girls reach adolescence. *Protecting the nutrition and health of girls and young women should be the cornerstone of public health. Not only will it prevent chronic disease, but it will produce new generations who have better health and wellbeing through their lives (Barker, unpublished) (9).*

² Such research include potential epigenetic effects of food and nutrition at critical developmental phases. In this context epigenetics can be described as how the environment (food and nutrition) may alter gene activity without changing the DNA sequence. While epigenetic changes can lead to modifications in gene activity that can be transmitted to future generations, experiments show that some epigenetic changes can be reversed.

Infancy to age 5 years – when healthy growth can remedy effects of pre-natal malnutrition Children from birth to age 5 years bear the highest global burden of malnutrition where 21.3% (144 million children) are affected by stunting, 6.9% (47 million children) by wasting and 5.6% (38 million children) are overweight (1). The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 is likely to increase the numbers of children affected by such malnutrition (1).

Once a child is born, a break-neck pace of growth and development is triggered. Regardless of the food security situation an infant is born into, over the first 12 months of life infants are primed to treble their birth weight and double their surface area. This unique feature of growth and development is never repeated during the human life cycle. For the initial six months of this incredible first year of life, breast milk can provide all that babies need. But in some parts of the world, malnutrition robs breast feeding women of this lifegiving source of nutrition with devastating consequences for their infants.

The Infant's and the Visitor's story

The overseas Visitor, a charity patron, watches as the mothers stand in line waiting for clinic staff to weigh and assess their emaciated children. Only weak cries break the silence.

Sadness is everywhere. Mothers whisper their shared stories about having nothing to eat or to feed their children; of their breast milk disappearing; and of the sicknesses weakening their already fading children. While the weighing scales are re-adjusted, a baby girl is given to the Visitor to hold.

The child fits within the Visitor's hand, her small rib-cage palpable.

She is five months old. Clinic staff work tirelessly triaging the children and their mothers. Only the Visitor has the space to be conscious of holding starvation in her hands.

There is enough food in the world to feed everyone - but food is unaffordable for almost a fifth of the world's population (1.5 billion) (1). In 2019 it was estimated that almost 7% (47 million) of children under 5 years of age were affected by wasting and 21% (144 million) by stunting (1).

Breast milk is uniquely suitable for human infants, providing immunological, nutritional and psychological benefits for mother and infant that far outweigh any other infant feeding method. Breast feeding protects infants against infection, gastroenteritis and sudden infant death and can be lifesaving, especially in LIC and LMIC. Long-term benefits for breastfed infants include protection against diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease and allergic diseases. Mothers who breastfeed have

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reduced long term risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer and rheumatoid arthritis. Despite all these benefits, as economies improve, breast feeding rates decline, especially among women of a lower socio-economic status. This is a critical issue, as breastfeeding has many superior nutritional and health benefits when compared to formula feeding – in particular the promotion of a leaner body mass in breastfed infants can reduce the risk of obesity.

During the second six months of infancy, the exclusively breastmilk-based diet needs to evolve to include an increasing variety of non-salty, staple foods. Such foods are needed to provide crucial vitamins and minerals, such as iron and vitamin D; energy with essential fatty acids and carbohydrates but only minimal added sugar and fat. Throughout this process, food acceptance and taste preferences are learned and new skills and feeding patterns are developed. Breastfeeding during this complementary feeding period can protect against development of food allergy and intolerance.

Ann's story

Returning to work after having a baby is never easy but Ann has managed this before.

Commercial baby foods were quite handy back then. Only these days most of the useful products seem to have disappeared and been replaced with baby snack foods.

Surely shortcake, jelly sweets and chocolate are not suitable for 9-month-olds?

As for those foil packets of lentil finger foods and carrot sticksthey're really just chips and crisps! Ann used to believe that all foods aimed at babies must be a good choice.....

but now food shopping for babies is as much of minefield as it is for everyone else.

Surveys of foods targeting babies and young children have shown these food products are part of a rapidly evolving market (>70% are new products every 5 years). As many as 15 to 43% of such foods contain excessive levels of added sugar and fat (10) (11) (12). To address these issues EU legislation on foods for babies and young children is currently under revision.

Some of products marketed as 'baby-' or 'toddler-' foods, seem based on the concept of infants and young children as 'small adults' and do not cater for the exquisitely sensitive, unique period of development they are going through. For example, the infant's developing brain increases from 25% of adult size at birth, to 80% at age 3, and 90% at age 5 years.

Critical nutrients for infant brain development include DHA (13) (naturally present in breast milk), and iron. Inadequate nutrition leading to persistent iron deficiency anaemia can permanently impair cognitive development (5). Iron deficiency is common in young children

- exacerbated in LIC and LMIC by enteropathogenic infection (5), and affecting up to 26% of children aged 12 to 23 months in HIC (1

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From infancy up to age 5 years, children begin to assert their own autonomy in food choice. Some foods, particularly strong flavoured vegetables, need to be offered many times - over years, to foster acceptance of the type and variety of foods a child will need for health throughout life. Persistence in nurturing a child's taste for healthy food establishes lifelong habits that protect them against obesity and diet-related disease well into the future. Spiralling increases in obesity rates are now being experienced in transitioning economies in many LMIC. This is due to very rapid changes in food systems, which include widespread and increased availability of processed foods high in sugar and fat but low in essential nutrients (15). Lack of adequate food safety measures to cover the rapidly evolving food systems, result in a high risk of food borne diseases where infants and young children have highest mortality and morbidity risk.

Mihir's and Sahil's story

The heartbreak of neighbours losing their children to the latest foodborne illness, really frightened Mihir and Sahil's parents. Those children became very ill so quickly. Precious children that were strong and healthy - just like their 4-year-old Mihir and 3-year-old Sahil. There is still uncertainty about what caused the outbreak - rumours hint it was contaminated fresh food or maybe even the water. Although all the new jobs are welcome, town is very over-crowded. Finding fresh food that can be relied upon to be safe is becoming ever harder. The parents decide processed foods are safer for their boys - foods wrapped and sealed in packaging, such as crisps and biscuits. And soft drinks seem so much safer than water.

Complex food systems in Low Middle-Income Countries where economies are rapidly transitioning, have the highest rates of food safety incidents. Children under the age of 5 years bear the biggest burden in terms of illness and death from such incidents(15). Shifts in food habits towards packaged processed foods, which seem safer, contribute to a rapid rise in obesity (15).

This combination of overnutrition and obesity in later life with undernutrition in early life (low birth weight, stunting) in rapidly transitioning LMIC is particularly harmful – leading to spiralling increases in cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer. This mix of malnutrition (early life undernutrition and later life overnutrition) is referred to as the Double-Burden of Malnutrition(6).

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Food and nutrition for school children

Children's growth and development progresses steadily from age 5 years. This continues through primary/elementary school until the pubertal growth spurt, which occurs in girls around age 9 years, and in boys around age 11. Food of poor nutritional quality (e.g., inadequate in vitamins and minerals or under-/ over-supply of calories) will compromise academic performance as well as growth (leading to stunting, under-/over-weight or obesity).

School food programmes address child hunger

Food insecurity affects school children throughout the world. Research has shown that school food programmes can address these gaps of child hunger and significantly improve nutritional status, especially for children at highest risk of food insecurity. For these reasons, many countries have prioritised continued provision of school food programmes even when schools are closed during Covid-19 lockdowns (16).

School food programmes in LIC and LMIC generally provide foods fortified with vitamins and minerals (17). Evaluation of such programmes demonstrate improved nutritional status and lower risk of respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses (17) (18). In HIC, where food is abundant but access to healthy food choices is limited for children in disadvantaged families, one school child in every 20 has nothing to eat until lunchtime. Evaluation of school food programmes in HIC demonstrate that schools serving disadvantaged children should offer universal free school meals, rather than limiting the offering of free/discounted meals to children that qualify based on family means assessments. A universal approach covers many excluded children in need of such nutritional support and eliminates any stigma associated with entitlement to such programmes (19). Apart from the success of these food programmes in addressing child hunger, significant improvements in academic performance and in reducing absenteeism have been demonstrated.

In summary, school is a critical setting for interventions that can support nutrition, health and well-being of children at risk. The success of such programmes is based on regular school attendance. Providing support for the many malnourished children throughout the world who never have the opportunity to attend school and are at high risk of severe infection due to unsanitary living conditions, presents a much bigger challenge.

Maria's and Diwa's story

Maria watches children playing games she created with Diwa. She misses Diwa. With Diwa there was always magic. Dips and hollows in mountains of rubbish became palaces. Pools of putrid water filled with debris turned into lakes where they dived for treasure. The ragged swing under the bridge had a secret power that could fly them to the moon.

But then Diwa became sick. Day after day she lay still – until one day they took her away. Losing Diwa has blocked all escape for Maria. Flies and filth have traded places with the palaces and treasure-filled lakes. The fantasy prince she planned to marry has vanished - gone forever - taking her dreams along with his elephants. Now all Maria can see and smell is rotting refuse as she begins to realise how little separates her from it.

“In the world's poorest slums, landfills and polluted rivers become a child's playground”(20). Lack of sanitation, safe food and water lead to unacceptable mortality among children under 5 years (15) - youngest humans bearing a disproportionate share of disease and death.

Feeling good about myself

Children might express self-esteem as 'feeling good about myself'. The power of positive self-esteem cannot be underestimated when it comes to motivating healthy behaviour around food and eating habits.

Mary's story

The doctor explained that Mary's 'weight growth is getting too far ahead of her height growth'. He assured Mary's mother that by enjoying healthy eating and having fun being active Mary would 'grow into her weight' – a steady process that could take a year or two. Mary had been secretly worried she was becoming too heavy and was delighted this could be sorted. It was all so easy at the start. Everyone in her family was kind and helpful.

Then the Lockdown shut down schools; her basketball and swimming activities stopped; even the playgrounds closed. Now they watch television a lot more so her parents can work. The ads make her feel hungry for all the wrong foods. Worst of all was when her brother blamed her for the lack of family treats and called her fat! Even though he said he was sorry and swore he'd never say it again, she is terrified everyone in her school will find out. Sometimes she feels so bad about herself that all she wants to do is eat candy.

School closures, decreased physical activity, increased screen time and possible stress-induced indulgence in high-fat, high-sugar foods lead to rates spiralling obesity rates among susceptible children (21). Many in this situation to blame themselves, losing the confidence and positive self esteem they need to build healthy habits around food and physical activity.

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It is imperative that child health issues such as childhood obesity, are addressed as a health priority as the global Covid-19 pandemic continues (22). Plans also need to be progressed on how to prioritise prevention and management of childhood obesity when the pandemic is over (21) (22). Researchers have warned that if childhood obesity is left to spiral the long- term effects on health and economic consequence are likely to be more profound than the actual Covid-19 infection (21).

Adolescents – where their 'almost adult size' hides their vulnerability

The pubertal growth spurt begins in girls around age 9 years, and in boys around age 11 years - but the exact timing varies considerably. Some children are 'early-developers' and can be two to four years ahead of those who are 'late-developers'. Puberty is associated with substantial changes body composition and fat distribution, transforming childhood body shape into adulthood. The pubertal growth spurt lasts about four years and is second only to infancy in terms of rapid growth and development. After puberty is attained, slower growth continues to increase children's stature and body size until it is complete at around 18 years of age. The full adolescent period (pre-puberty to age 18 years) marks the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood where children's food needs are greatest. Food must provide extra nutrients to support this critical period where 40% of bone mineral density is accrued, 45% of adult weight and 20% of adult height is attained. Providing food to adequately nourish adolescent children represents the most expensive period of feeding children because of all the food needed to adequately nourish their almost adult size as well as support their rapid growth and development.

Compared with boys, adolescent girls eat less food as a consequence of their relative smaller size, and this leads to lower intakes of essential nutrients. Nonetheless, due to their principal role in human reproduction, female adolescents have higher nutritional requirements compared to males. This puts adolescent girls at much higher risk of nutritional inadequacy. For example, due to increased iron needed to cover menstrual losses combined with the extra required to support growth and development, girls during the adolescent phase have the highest iron requirements of healthy humans. For these reasons adolescent girls are at high risk of iron deficiency, which compromises cognitive, as well as physical, capacity. This can have significant effects given that girls compete academically during this life phase.

However, of much greater significance are the far-reaching consequences of pregnancy during adolescent growth.

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Circle of life – back to the beginning all over again

Ensuring adequate nutrition during female adolescence is where the circle of life begins all over again. As outlined in this paper, well-nourished women at conception and during pregnancy, profoundly enhance the health and well-being of the next generation.

Menarche occurs just as the pubertal growth spurt is nearing completion, but girls still have another 4 years of growth remaining. This is why adolescent pregnancies exact such a high cost nutritionally. Providing for the mother's continuing growth in addition to meeting the needs of pregnancy is very challenging. Such pregnancies represent higher risk of:

premature death, urinary tract infections, pre-eclampsia/ eclampsia, preterm birth, anaemia and depression *for mothers*;

and of:

increased mortality (SIDS), growth retardation and low birth weight (leading to greater vulnerability to cardiovascular disease and diabetes in later life), infection and lower likelihood to be breast-fed *for infants*.

Preventing adolescent pregnancies is key for ensuring lifelong health of mothers and future generations of children. A recent report examined time trends and sociodemographic inequalities in adolescent motherhood in 74 LIC and LMIC between 1990 and 2018 using 254 Demographic and Health Surveys, calculating the trends in the prevalence of adolescent motherhood using the average annual rate of change (23). This shows variable progress highlighting declines, stagnation and, in some instances, increases in the prevalence of adolescent motherhood across countries. Such findings have led to questions about why some countries have been successful in generating momentum to reduce the prevalence of adolescent motherhood and others have lagged behind (24).

'Feed the child and save the world' – Conclusions

This paper provides only a brief summary of children's nutritional issues and highlights just a few of the many circumstances that threaten children's life-long health. The relentless nature of growth and development never waits for a 'better time'. So, action to protect children and support them to reach their full potential is always urgent. The values and beliefs of the wider community and society are essential for supporting family members of all ages to be role- models, inspiring positive food behaviours and eating habits in children that last them a lifetime

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There is so much to be gained from a diet and a supportive environment that ensures optimal childhood growth and development. Childhood is often defined as the period from birth to, approximately, 18 years of age when growth is complete. Nonetheless, as outlined in this paper, the impact of food and nutrition occurs long before birth. The food habits of parents – especially of mothers, profoundly influence a child's growth, development and lifelong health. Epigenetic research (2) is uncovering how this influence may also involve the childhood health and nutritional well-being of a child's father, grandparents... and even their parents (7).

From well before a child is conceived - throughout pregnancy, childhood and adolescence, food and nutrition determine capacity for health and physical prowess, intellectual ability as well as aptitude for education and training - all of immense value economically for any nation. Due to such potent enhancement of human capital, providing optimal food and nutrition throughout childhood has the power to transform countries and change the world.

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2021 International Day of Families

Families and New Technologies

Background Note

Megatrends, including **new technologies, demographic shifts, rapid urbanization and migration trends**, as well as **climate change**, have been dramatically shaping our world in recent years, impacting individuals and families. In preparation for the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2024 (IYF+30) the Division for Inclusive Social Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs aims to raise awareness of mega-trends and present research on their impacts on families. The observances of the International Day of Families, 2021-2024 are to focus on each trend, starting with **families and new technologies in 2021**. The focus on megatrends is to facilitate the analysis of their impacts on family life and recommend responsive family-oriented policies to harness the positive aspects of those trends and counteract their negative facets.¹

The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the **importance of digital technologies for work, education and communication**. The pandemic has accelerated technological changes that had already been under way both in society and at work, including the expanded use of digital platforms and related technological innovations like cloud computing and the use of big data and algorithms. As a result, innovative ways of working as well as flexibility for both employees and employers have been on the rise.²

On the other hand, concerns have been raised over some negative impacts relating to technology such as 'screen fatigue' and cyber bullying. In addition, school closures and increased demand for working from home, exacerbated already growing concerns over rising levels of **parental burnout** which can be linked to

¹ See Report of the Secretary General on the Implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes, A/76/61-E/2021/4.

² World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work International Labour Office, Geneva: ILO, 2021.

long-term negative impacts on child well-being.³ Now, more than ever, parents and caregivers, especially those engaged in full-time employment, need resources to successfully manage their parenting obligations. With the growing field of innovative technologies, new digital technologies have a potential to empower parents to meet such obligations successfully. In exploring the impact of new technologies on families, the observance of the International Day of Families will focus, in particular, on the current state and future potential of digital technologies in advancing parenting education.

Parenting education can be defined as interventions or services aimed at improving parenting interactions, behaviours, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices, and encompassing strategies of positive parenting, psychosocial stimulation and maltreatment prevention. Parenting education is key for empowering parents to ensure children’s and family well-being and is fundamental to ensure children’s healthy development. In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, as children pursue hybrid or full-time remote learning, the engagement of parents at home is indispensable to enable continuous learning and ensure mental and physical well-being of children.

As evidenced by the recent voluntary national review, parenting education programmes have not yet been widely recognized by governments as conducive to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals.⁴ Consequently, the importance of parenting education has been emphasized in the recent report of the Secretary-General which recommended to Member States to *“Invest in parenting education programmes in cooperation with families and relevant entities at the national level, as well as with regional and international organizations, civil society and academics and ensure that the programmes are inclusive of grandparents and other relatives raising children; maintain a gender perspective and recognize the role of men in families”*⁵

³ Parental burnout can be defined as parenting-related stress stemming from a mismatch between the demands of parenting and the resources at parents’ disposal to meet those demands.

⁴ See Rosario Esteinou “Family-oriented Priorities, Policies and Programmes in the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as Reported in the Voluntary National Reviews of 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019” available at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2020/05/VNR-PAPER.FINAL_08.05.pdf

⁵ A/76/61-E/2024/4 para 92 (c)

The 2021 International Day of Families observance is to raise awareness of the importance of such programmes for child and parental well-being and achievement of several SDG targets recognizing that, new technologies may pose challenges but have a great potential to advance parenting education and empower parents for the well-being of their families.

Launch of the Background Paper on “*Technology Use and Families: Implications for Work-Family Balance and Parenting Education*”⁶

A major research paper is to be launched at the observance. The paper on “*Technology use and Families*” focuses on the impact of digital technologies on children at different stages in their lives as well as parents and parenting itself. It analyzes several aspects of technology impact on families including equity and access, privacy and online safety as well as digital literacy. The main focus of the paper is on work-family balance and parenting education. The keynote address by the author will examine digital technologies and parenting education.

Importantly, the paper emphasizes viewing parenting education as a viable and valuable preventive strategy to reduce child abuse and to support healthy development of children, whether offered alone or as a component of wider family support investments and continuing evidence-informed approaches to parenting education design, delivery and implementation to reach wide audiences, and address child, parenting and parent-child outcomes.

In terms of **technology considerations in parenting education**, technology is seen as a vehicle through which to assist parents and families with learning *how to effectively use and choose technology for their children* (technology as a content area for parenting education) and, as offering tools and a virtual environment *for the delivery of parent education*. Given parents’ use of technology for acquiring parenting information, sharing content, and supporting their parenting goals, ICT

⁶ Susan Walker “Technology Use and Families: Implications for Work-Family Balance and Parenting Education”, UNDESA, 2021, forthcoming.

offers an obvious avenue to reach wider audiences and new methods for effective delivery.

“As parents use technology in their roles as parents – texting and video calls to communicate with children, to reassure and coach their children through challenges, learning alongside with children with education technologies, and sharing the joy of gaming - parenting education can help promote the value and how to use these new media and possibly create new rules for parent-child communication. Finally, parents may need help navigating these spaces as they too can be subject to social comparison, bullying and overuse. When new technologies and workplace policies mean the navigation of flexible work and home time and space boundaries, parenting education can help parents acquire ‘digital cultural capital’.”⁷

The objectives of the 2021 observance of the International Day of Families “Families and New Technologies” are as follows:

- + demonstrate the importance of family-oriented policies and programmes to effectively respond to the challenges posed by the rapid expansion of new technologies;**
- + present current research on the growing potential of information and communication technologies to empower parents through parenting education tools to benefit families and society at large;**
- + warn of negative impacts of new technologies on children and families;**
- + share good practices in harnessing digital technologies for parenting education and overall family well-being.**

⁷ Ibid.



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MMM at the UN Commission on Social Development: Harnessing digital technologies for family well-being: our collective responsibility

On 12 February, MMM organised a virtual event on “Harnessing digital technologies for maternal health and parenting – a real bonus for family well-being?”. The webinar took place on the sidelines of the 59th session of the UN Commission on Social Development (8–17 February) with the priority theme “Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all”.

It is an understatement that with the pandemic, digital technologies have become central to our personal, family and professional lives, with all three often overlapping. The event’s objective was to address its impact on family well-being.

The first part of the virtual discussion covered the benefits, with a focus on the huge potential offered by maternal and child mobile health. Two mobile apps were presented: SAHFA’s JamboMama! and Best Beginnings’ Baby Buddy app. Both technologies are geared to empowering parents, especially mothers, with information and a communication tool to improve maternal and child health.

The event’s second part addressed the challenges that “connected parents” face, with digital technologies invading their everyday lives, especially under confinement, turning their homes into offices and their private lives into professional ones. Whether it regards telework, online distance learning or managing screen times and uses in their children’s lives, it was agreed that parents need both support and information/education on how to make the best use of these technologies to ensure the well-being of every family member.

It is now up to us to make digital technologies contribute to family well-being.

See the full program and watch the full recording of the event on [Harnessing digital technologies for family well-being: our collective responsibility](#).

MMM’s report of the event was also published on the UN Social Development Network (UNSDN) website: [Harnessing digital technologies for maternal health and parenting](#).

MMM also addressed the Commission during the general debate and took this opportunity to highlight the specific challenges that mothers face in relation to the use of digital technologies, which were made even more acute and visible with the COVID-19 crisis and its subsequent lockdowns.

Read about the MMM intervention: [MMM spotlights parenting and motherhood challenges in the digital era](#).

MMM at the 46th Session of the UN Human Rights Council: Child poverty alleviation cannot be disassociated from support to parents

Globally, about 1 billion children are multidimensionally poor, with some of their basic human rights not satisfied, including the right to food, clean water, healthcare or education, threatening their chance to survive and thrive.

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Not only are children more likely to live in poverty than adults, they are also more vulnerable to its effects. In addition to suffering from poor living standards, the poorest children grow up less healthy, develop fewer skills, and earn lower wages later in life.

The intergenerational aspect of poverty must be broken. Addressing child poverty must therefore be a top priority for every government. It should also be seen as an investment – with potentially high returns. In this respect, MMM welcomes the EU's commitment to develop a European Child Guarantee, which if adopted, would ensure that every child has access to health, housing, nutrition, education and childcare.

MMM wants to stress, however, that child poverty alleviation cannot be disassociated from support to parents and caregivers, beginning with their right to work and to a decent standard of living.

Among them, single parents merit specific attention. Even in Europe, around two fifths of single parent households are at risk of poverty or social exclusion – most of them are lone mothers.

For them, the challenge of juggling care responsibilities and paid work is especially acute. Caring for and educating a child requires time, and this unpaid yet essential work must be recognised for its positive impact on all of society, and fully supported, particularly during a child's critical early years. This means developing policies, structures and services to provide enough time, money and skills for parents.

Addressing child poverty is also working with and accompanying parents, especially mothers. Read more on

[Child poverty alleviation cannot be disassociated from support to parents.](#)

MMM at the UN Commission on the Status of Women calls for the recognition of mothers' unpaid care work

In her intervention at a parallel event to the 65th UN Commission on the Status of Women organised by OMEP, MMM President Anne-Claire de Liedekerke reaffirmed that caring for a child is not only work, but also an absolute necessity, a resource and an investment – especially during early childhood.

But she also drew attention to the price that mothers pay for the care they give to their children: *"What kind of world do we live in? When the treasure of care is counted for nothing, unless it is externalised and then enters the GDP."*

Her conclusion: *"It really is time to change our personal mindset about unpaid care work, particularly mothers' care for their children, because it is crucial to the next generation. Today the future of our children is in our hands but tomorrow it is our future that is going to be in their hands. So the recognition of unpaid family care work is not just a mother-child win-win, it is also a global and multi-generational win-win."*

Read her full intervention or watch the recording of the event on [MMM reaffirms: caring for a child is work, an absolute necessity, resource and investment.](#)



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MMM answers to a UN consultation on older women's human rights: Mothers are more likely to be at risk of poverty in old age

When it comes to receiving an adequate retirement pension, there are significant gaps between men and women around the world. These gaps are of 2 types: eligibility to receive a pension and the level of pensions. Globally, only about half of all people over the legal retirement age receive an old-age pension, and in most countries, men are the main beneficiaries. The gap is widest in developing countries. In Egypt and Jordan, for example, men are 7 to 8 times more likely to receive a pension than women.

Even when women are entitled to a pension, the level of their benefits is lower than that of men – although this gap varies considerably from country to country. For example, in the EU, women's pensions are on average 29% lower than men's, with the gap varying from 2% in Estonia to 44% in Luxembourg.

These pension gaps lead to a higher risk of income insecurity and poverty in old age for women. In addition, they threaten such economic and social rights like the right to health and an adequate standard of living. In the EU, for example, 17% of retired women are considered to be at risk of poverty, compared to 13% of men.

The reasons for these gender gaps in eligibility and benefits are multiple. They include lower labour market participation of women, lower average earnings, and a higher incidence of informal employment.

They are mainly the result of the different working patterns of men and women over the life course. The reality for a majority of families is that it is women/mothers rather than men/fathers who take on care responsibilities. In the majority of cases, mothers prioritise their families to the detriment of their own careers and future pensions, either by taking long career breaks to raise children or by being more likely to work part-time.

The inequitable division of unpaid family care work between men and women is at the root of many, if not all, of the inequalities and discrimination that women face throughout their lives. According to the former Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Magdalena Sepulveda, "the gendered division of unpaid care work is one of the main reasons why older women are more likely to live in poverty than their male counterparts."

And mothers are particularly penalised: not only because they interrupt their careers to bring up their children, but also because the M-F wage gap is greater for mothers than for women without children. As a result, pension gaps are higher for mothers than for women who have not had children. In France, for example, the M-F pension gap reaches 48% for mothers with 3 or more children, compared to 18% for women without children.

Time use surveys show that when paid and unpaid work is combined, women work more than men. Addressing the issue of unpaid care work, including the recognition of the essential value of this work to our economy and society, is therefore essential to empower women and to address the income insecurity and vulnerability to poverty of older women.

One way to achieve this is to implement "care credits" in pension systems, which are detailed in MMM's response to the consultation.

Read more on [Mothers are more likely to be at risk of poverty in old age](#).

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UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights says “good intentions are not enough”

Make Mothers Matter welcomes the statement recently made by Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights¹.

The statement was made following a two-month official fact-finding mission to the EU to examine the impact of EU policies on the eradication of poverty. This end-of-mission statement released on 29 January 2021 not only provides an extensive and thorough analysis of the situation in the EU, but also puts forward mechanisms and strategies to address existing problems in combatting poverty.

The proposals echo the demands and common concerns presented by MMM and other members of the Social Platform during a roundtable exchange with Mr De Schutter. On this occasion, different organisations presented their inputs on the challenges and opportunities within the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the social dimension of the European Green Deal, the European Semester process and the budget for recovery as well as the Social Scoreboard.

The exchange gave MMM an opportunity to present the specific challenges and opportunities for mothers and their families.

Unpaid carework

MMM addressed the need to redefine “work” as a holistic concept, combining both paid and unpaid work. Unpaid care work is an indispensable support to the world economy and **gender equality** will never be achieved until this **essential unpaid care work is recognised, reduced, and redistributed**.²

MMM informed the Special Rapporteur that about 80% of the time spent caring for children, people with a disability, or for the elderly was provided by informal carers: family, friends, or neighbours. However, this duty is mostly carried out by women. Moreover, current **pension systems cumulate inequalities** that occur over a person's lifetime.

Single mothers

MMM reported that women are more at **risk of poverty and social exclusion** than men (22.8% of women compared to 20.8% of men in 2018)³ and **single mothers are particularly vulnerable**. As the Special Rapporteur states, “these poverty figures, however, hide the faces of the people behind them: lone mothers for whom juggling care and work responsibilities is virtually impossible...” In fact, “women are also disproportionately represented **among lone-parent families (85%), 40.3%** of which have children and are at **risk of poverty or social exclusion**”.⁴

MMM pointed out the existing high level of **homelessness among mothers and their families**. Women face an increased risk of homelessness and/or have more difficulties in accessing housing, for themselves and their families. This is due to expensive private-sector rents, difficult to access affordable housing (increasingly scarce in many cities), discrimination and a higher risk of eviction.

Some of these risks have been exacerbated due to the pandemic, and **single-parent families** are more at risk than ever before.⁵ Many countries, such as Belgium and Finland, consider that the current COVID-19 crisis is hitting single mothers and their children hardest.

1 Statement by Professor Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, at his visit to the European Union (25 November 2020 to 29 January 2021)

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26693&LangID=E>

2 See MMM's answer to the public consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights <https://makemothersmatter.org/mmm-responds-to-eu-commissions-public-consultation/>

3 Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20191017-1?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2Feurostat%2F>

4 Ibid. p.2

5 “The impact of COVID-19 on people experiencing poverty and vulnerability”, 2020, p.48, European Anti-Poverty Network



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MMM agrees with the Special Rapporteur that poverty will not be ended with employment policies alone, but indeed with strong **redistributive measures**.

The European Child Guarantee

With regard to the Child Guarantee, Make Mothers Matter has been calling for the inclusion of family support. As Olivier De Schutter rightly states, "support to children cannot be disassociated from support to parents' access to employment and to a decent standard of living... Improving the situation of children depends on **improving the situation of their family**".⁶

Health care

Make Mothers Matter calls for the need to guarantee access to **affordable and quality health care** for all. This includes access to quality **maternal health care during pregnancy and after childbirth**. This right to health is built on the fundamental elements of **availability, accessibility, acceptability and high quality**.

MMM informed the Special Rapporteur that throughout the European region, **perinatal mortality rates varied by social and ethnic group**, with **migrants** tending to be the **most disadvantaged** group, and that **disrespectful practices at health care facilities** threatening maternal health and basic human rights were reported on a daily basis.

The UN Special Rapporteur will present his final report at the 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council in June 2021.

Read more [here](#).

MMM greater pay transparency: Can it tackle the gender pay gap?

Statistics show that at the current pace, closing the gender pay gap between men and women would take more than 250 years.⁷ The European Commission has finally published its proposal for a Directive to introduce pay transparency measures.

Make Mothers Matter **participated** in the public consultation "**Transparency on pay for men and women**" in May 2020, an initiative aimed at gathering feedback from stakeholders before launching the Directive proposal. Previously, MMM had also given its **feedback** to the public consultation on "equal pay".

MMM welcomes the proposal, as it is an important and necessary step towards closing the pay gap, which currently is substantial – on average, women in the EU earn 14.1% less than men in comparable positions. More precisely, MMM welcomes the below measures which it proposed in its recommendations:

- Relaxing the comparator requirement by allowing a hypothetical comparator to be used instead of an "actual" one;
- Companies with at least 250 workers publicly have to report on gender pay gaps;
- Employees' right to obtain information about average pay levels;
- Giving equality bodies and workers' representatives a more important role by giving them legal standing;
- Shifting the burden of proof onto employers if employees suspect there is a gender pay gap.

⁶ Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion, Peer Review on "Single mothers facing poverty: Providing adequate financial, material and social support for sustainable social integration", https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322303143_Belgium, 5 & 6 October 2017.

⁷ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf



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The Gender Pay Gap cannot be tackled if it is not made visible. The Directive proposal is therefore an important tool to close the gap, but it is only part of the answer.

It is encouraging that in the explanatory memorandum of the proposal, the EC considers other root causes of the gender pay gap, including unpaid care work.

For too long, unpaid care work has been put aside in the debate over gender equality. However, the fact that women, especially mothers, perform the largest share of unpaid care work has a strong effect in perpetuating women's slower labour force participation over the course of their lives and women's disproportionate participation in precarious employment, reinforcing the gender gap in pay and pension. This is an issue that MMM has been advocating for since its foundation in 1947 and has recently been put under the spotlight by the European Institute for Gender Equality⁸ in a report highlighting that women's disproportionate share of care work is one of the main root causes of the gender pay gap.

Without someone investing time, effort and resources in these essential daily tasks, communities, workplaces, and whole economies would grind to a halt.⁹ Yet it is not recognised, not valued, and perpetuates gender and economic inequalities.

Therefore, Make Mothers Matter calls upon the EU and Member States to adopt policies which **recognise, reduce, and redistribute** unpaid care work as detailed in this [paper](#).

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: Steady progress for unpaid care work

On 4 March 2021, the European Commission published its European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan¹⁰ aiming at **implementing the 20 Social Pillar principles**.

Since the proclamation of the Social Pillar in 2017, Make Mothers Matter has been calling for strong commitments to protect mothers and families. In particular, MMM has been advocating for the **reduction, recognition, and redistribution** of unpaid care work, persistently highlighting that it is at the root of the gender gaps (in employment, pay, pension, etc.).

The EC proposal addresses the 3 main areas of the pillar: skills and equality, more and better jobs, and social protection and inclusion. According to the latest Eurobarometer¹¹, for the majority of the respondents, the fight against poverty and social inequalities are at the top of the priorities. MMM believes that in order to achieve social inclusion and social justice the EU needs to develop a comprehensive implementation plan for all 20 pillars.

Read the full text [here](#).

8 EIGE, "Gender inequalities in care and consequences on the labour market"

9 Oxfam, Time to care, <https://indepth.oxfam.org.uk/time-to-care/>

10 <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/empl/european-pillar-of-social-rights/en/>

11 Eurobarometer: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/parlemeter-2020>



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About Make Mothers Matter – MMM

Make Mothers Matter believes in the power of mothers to make the world a better place, advocating for their recognition and support as changemakers.

Created in 1947, MMM is an international NGO with no political or religious affiliations, transparently voicing the concerns of mothers at the highest level: the European Union, UNESCO and the United Nations (general consultative status).

Compiled by Irina Pálffy-Daun-Seiler, MMM Representative to the United Nations in Vienna, with input from Valérie Bichelmeier, MMM Representative to the United Nations in Geneva, and Johanna Schima, Head of the European Delegation of MMM.

A positive side effect of the pandemic?

Teleworking and gender equality in the future

1 February 2021



Social scientists have long recognized that access to flexible work arrangements is a major contributor to gender equality [1], and telework is a way to provide the flexibility needed by parents, provided concurrent gender discrimination causes are prevented, as defined by the European Framework Agreement. [2]

We have seen telework unexpectedly increased by the pandemic in the past months. As of 2019, only 5.4% of employed in the EU-27 usually worked from home – a share that remained rather constant since 2009. Estimates from Eurofound suggest that close to 40% of those working in the EU began to telework fulltime as a result of COVID-19. [3] This trend will most probably stay in the future, even if not in such great numbers. Consequently, the negative impact of some aspects of telework have also grown, particularly some forms of discrimination for women (and, indirectly, for their children). They should be confronted and compensated, to avoid the pandemic and its aftermath bring more gender inequality to vast sectors of society.

As a Federation of more than 250 Family Enrichment Centers that operates in 70 countries and benefits over 90,000 people annually, we confirm the urgent need of advocating for it, according to the following guidelines:

The Portuguese Presidency of the European Council has asked the Economic and Social Committee to prepare an exploratory opinion on 'Teleworking and gender equality - conditions so that teleworking does not exacerbate the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men and for it to be an engine for promoting gender equality'.

This paper includes the contribution of IFFD to the opinion, as part of a selection of social partners and civil society organisations that will feed in to its preparation, together with other texts that explain how telework has impacted the situation of telework and its future perspectives.

IFFD Contribution to the EESC Opinion on Teleworking and Gender Equality, 5 January 2021.

*Original available at:
<https://familyperspective.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021eescptw.pdf>*

How could telework patterns develop after the COVID-19 crisis? *

With the outbreak of the pandemic, telework has reached a tipping point as more and more companies and institutions have introduced this work arrangement in an effort to keep their employees safe, while ensuring the continued delivery of critical services. Yet, given the large differences in prior experience with telework and other factors discussed in this brief, the transition to telework may have been more challenging for some workers, employers and EU countries than for others. Furthermore, the fact that in several EU countries more than half of those who are currently teleworking had no prior experience, arguably makes the transition even more difficult. This has important implications on employment, firms' productivity, and workers' wellbeing, at least in the short- to medium- term.

Ultimately, the spread of telework in the longer-term will depend on a broad range of factors, including its effect on productivity and working conditions, as well as its contribution to broader policy objectives such as Europe's digital and green transitions. Evidence suggests that in normal times people working from home can sustain, or even enhance, their productivity, while enjoying a better work-life balance.

Yet, under the current exceptional circumstances productivity, working conditions, or both, may be deteriorating for many workers due to, among other problems, lack of child-care, unsuitable working spaces and ICT tools. Policies to support the transition to more widespread remote work will need to carefully consider the potential benefits and costs for productivity, job quality, and workers' work-life balance and mental health.

Meanwhile, as stressed by the Commission in the communication on the 2020 country specific recommendations, the benefits of telework may not be available to the unskilled or untrained. Against this backdrop, continued income support measures remain crucial to protect the livelihoods of these workers. Yet, to the extent the effects of the current crisis will endure in the longer-term, policies aimed at retraining and upskilling EU workers will also be important to ensure life-long employability of the EU workforce and facilitate workers transitions across industries.

* EU's science and knowledge service – Joint Research Center, 'Telework in the EU before and after the COVID-19: where we were, where we head to', 2020.

1. Work arrangements

Eurostat data shows that the gender pay gap in the EU stands at 14% and has only changed minimally over the last decade. It means that women earn 14% on average less per hour than men. [4]

In response to COVID-19, a number of countries have adopted far-reaching measures to contain losses in jobs and income. [5] Those gains shouldn't be reversed after the pandemic – on the contrary, they should be consolidated and further developed.

2. Access

Access to the Internet is needed for telework, but it is no longer just a yes/no question. The quality of families' connections, and the kinds and capabilities of devices they can access, have considerable consequences for parents and children alike.

Cost remains the primary explanation for why families are less connected than they would like to be – or why they are not connected at all. But it is also important to explore why families with limited discretionary income prioritize purchasing digital devices. We find that many lower-income families are making the most of whatever forms of connectivity they can afford. [6]

Workers should not incur additional costs when performing their work from their homes. They are also entitled to obtain equipment and tools from their employer that allow them to work as if they were at their regular workplace, without negative consequences on their performance, effectiveness, and wellbeing. Therefore, in order to achieve a similar level of productivity as in the office, the employer needs to ensure that teleworkers have access to the technology and tools that they would otherwise be using if they were at the workplace. A continuous dialogue between the employer and the employee is vital to detect any difficulties with the tools and for the workers to come forward with their specific needs, in terms of ICT equipment and software as well as related training. [7]

3. Housework

The UN Sustainable Development Agenda promotes to "recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate." [8]

Evidence shows that care jobs are often characterized by temporary or zero-hours contracts, low salaries, work overload and long hours. The care pay penalty is more pronounced for women, in particular in the occupations in which they predominate, such as nursing. [9] Lower pay also undermines the capacity of care workers to obtain care for their family members, thus adding to their overall care responsibilities.

Women are generally more involved in these activities. On average, Eurofound reports them spending 35 hours per week caring for children or grandchildren (compared to 25 hours per week for men) and 18 hours per week doing housework (12 hours per week for men). The difference between men and women in terms of participation in childcare and housework increases even more among those who have children aged under 12. On average, women spent 62 hours per week caring for children (compared to 36 hours for men) and 23 hours per week doing housework (15 hours for men). Single parents, both male and female, spent longer hours than average on childcare and female single parents with children under 12 spent the longest hours of all groups (77 hours per week). [10]

4. Children

The Council of the European Union has recently agreed that “public policies should be designed in order to create the conditions, inter-alia the economic environment, enabling individuals and families to have the children they wish and to enjoy a better quality of life, live in safety and achieve balance between work, family and caring responsibilities.” [11]

The main differences between those with and without small children are in relation to concentration levels and juggling time between work and family. According to Eurofound, 34% of those with children under 12 feel that their job prevents them giving time to the family. Regarding employment status, working women with children under 12 in the household spent 54 hours per week on childcare, compared with 32 hours for men). In terms of housework, women spent more time than men on this, both when they were in employment (16 hours compared to 11 hours), or when they were unemployed or inactive (20 hours compared to 12 hours for men). [12]

To compensate for these differences, comprehensive well-resourced and flexible parental leave entitlements, part-time working arrangements according to parental choice by ensuring non-discriminatory practices towards parents should be established. Parental leaves should be preferred to paid leave for mothers, to avoid possible gender discrimination in the staff selection process, making sure its duration and remuneration are adequate.

Breastfeeding is another need for mothers that shouldn't be neglected. According to UNICEF, only 39 percent of businesses offer any support for breastfeeding, usually in the form of breaks, and more comprehensive programs to support lactating mothers are absent. UNICEF and the World Health Organization recommend exclusive breastfeeding for at least six months after childbirth. [13]

Business employers and labour unions should also work together with governments to ensure safe working conditions for pregnant women and their children, minimize shift work and long, unpredictable working hours of parents with young children, and introduce flexible work arrangements to enable parents to take care of their children. [14]

The future of teleworking post-COVID-19 *

The full impact of COVID-19 on labour markets remains to be determined. However, it is likely that rates of telework will remain significantly higher than they were prior to the onset of the pandemic. Governments and social partners will have to plan for several different scenarios, in which restrictions will be increased or eased according to how the epidemic is advancing or receding on their territory and prepare for teleworking arrangements to once again become generalised on short notice.

During the next, highly uncertain period, workers, employers, and governments will have to adapt to a new way of living and working, which will require new behaviours and new norms. It most likely will involve a hybrid or blended form of isolation (i.e., teleworking) and deconfinement (i.e., the possibility to use the workplace but with controlled conditions based on physical distancing).

Government-mandated lockdowns and mass teleworking were initiated in an emergency situation in many countries, and social partners were often not involved in the negotiation or design of teleworking arrangements, with the exception of a few countries where these processes are deeply embedded in existing organizations at all levels, such as Germany and the Nordic countries. Going forward, it will be imperative to ensure that social partners play a central role in drawing out the lessons learned from the first two phases of the initial pandemic response and workers transitioning from office-based work to teleworking, and to apply these lessons to revise existing or initiate new teleworking policies.

Early-stage research and surveys have found that a very high percentage of workers would like to telework more frequently—even after physical distancing restrictions have been lifted. Additionally, some workers have now realized that their jobs can be performed outside of traditional office spaces, and are now also more comfortable using technology. Many leaders who previously were resistant to their teams working from home have experienced that it can be done and are supportive of workers teleworking more frequently. For example, one study of 1,000 SME owners and decision-makers in 19 cities across the UK reports that nearly one in three (29 per cent) SMEs plan to increase flexible working post-pandemic.

* ILO, 'Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond - A Practical Guide', 2020.

Policy context in Europe *

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is of unprecedented scope and magnitude, affecting the health and socioeconomic situation of millions of people across the globe. In the European Union, over 2.2 million people had contracted the virus by September 2020. The economic impact is equally grim. In July, the European Commission estimated that the European economy would contract by 8.3% in 2020. The prediction is that divergences between Member States will widen because of large differences in the scale of the impact of the pandemic and the extent of recoveries.

In response, the European Union and its Member States have introduced many measures to tackle the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. At the centre of the efforts lie measures that aim to rebuild national economies, safeguard jobs and promote social cohesion. On 27 May 2020, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced plans to borrow €750 billion to support recovery efforts in the EU. On 21 July, the Heads of State and Government of the 27 EU Member States reached agreement on the plan at a special European Council meeting (the longest European Council meeting ever). The plan is still subject to negotiations between the European Parliament and the EU Member States.

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the importance of the equal right to social protection. Through the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), this right will be extended to all people, irrespective of their employment relationship, and

extends the same coverage rights to self-employed people. The crisis also shows the importance of income protection – the EU framework for national minimum wages is about to be introduced as part of the implementation of the EPSR. With many jobs gone (at least temporarily), the crisis also underscores the need for urgent action to tackle unemployment – especially youth unemployment.

The ‘Living, working and COVID-19’ e-survey provides an insight into the impact of the pandemic on people’s lives. It helps to identify the areas of life and work most affected by the pandemic and provides data about both material and non-material aspects. The results will help policymakers understand where action is most needed in living and working conditions to bring about an equal recovery from the pandemic.

The findings of the e-survey from the first round reflected widespread emotional distress, financial worry and low levels of trust in institutions. Levels of concern abated somewhat in the second round, particularly among groups of respondents who were benefiting from support measures implemented during the pandemic. At the same time, the results underline stark differences between countries and between socioeconomic groups that point to growing inequalities.

The results confirm the upsurge in teleworking across all countries during the COVID-19 pandemic that has been documented elsewhere, and the report explores what this means for work–life balance and elements of job quality

* Eurofound ‘Living, working and COVID-19’, 2020.

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- [1] Goldin C, How to Achieve Gender Equality, Milken Institute Review, 2015.
 - [2] “Telework, is a form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer’s premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis” (Article 2).
 - [3] Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19, 2020.
 - [4] Eurostat, Gender Statistics Database, 2019.
 - [5] Cf. ILO brief, The COVID-19 response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work, 2020.
 - [6] ILO, Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, 2020.
 - [7] ILO, Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, 2020.
 - [8] Target 5.4.
 - [9] ILO, Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture, 2018.
 - [10] Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19, 2020.
 - [11] Conclusions on Demographic Challenges – the Way Ahead, 2020.
 - [12] Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19, 2020.
 - [13] UNICEF, Family-Friendly Policies - A Global Survey of Business Policy, 2020.
 - [14] UNICEF, Business and Family-Friendly Policies - An Evidence Brief, 2019.

The first and most resilient responders

Mothers have had to make very difficult choices during the pandemic

1 March 2021



Due to the effects of the crisis response, parents have to face a pronounced slowing of job growth, employment uncertainty, remote learning of their children and lack of child care. A situation that has impacted the parental status where women fall back into traditional roles in the household.

A whole generation of women, regardless of their commitment to their families, may be pretty badly scarred by COVID. Mothers worldwide are sacrificing market skills to help their family members while putting a lot of stress into their marriages and financial security. For example, a Pandemic Parenting Study conducted by Jessica Calarco has found that 40 percent of her respondents are reporting increases in pandemic-related frustrations with their partners, and child care is a major source of strife. Rather than ask their partners to step up their domestic contributions, “mothers blame themselves for these conflicts and feel responsible for reducing them, including by leaving the workforce, beginning use of antidepressants, or ignoring their own concerns about Covid-19.”

For instance, even before the virus, child care was outrageously expensive in many parts of the world, making families pay more for care and other work-related expenses than they

The COVID-19 global health emergency and its economic and social impacts have disrupted nearly all aspects of life for all groups in society. People of different ages, however, are experiencing its effects in different ways.

Many women are finding themselves in the untenable position of making decisions that are sensible for their families in the near term, but are also emotionally devastating and have long-lasting consequences in their personal and professional life. “Women are responding in the ways that they often do: with an incredible display of resilience”, says Loyce Pace, president of Global Health Council. Women in the family have long been considered the resilient link that holds them together.

IFFD Written Statement of IFFD to the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 15-26 March 2021.

*Original available at:
<https://undocs.org/E/CN.6/2021/NGO/106>*

Participation and decision-making*

The 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2021 will consider 'Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls' as its priority theme. To take stock of current research, and assist the Commission in its deliberations on the priority theme, UN Women convened a virtual Expert Group Meeting (EGM) from 5–8 October 2020.

The EGM built on the priority themes of the preceding CSW sessions, taking special note of the 50th session which also considered equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels. While the EGM acknowledged the evolving manner that women participate in, and influence, public life and decision-making, progress on women's political participation at all levels of decision-making has stalled in many regions and even regressed in some places.

The EGM recognized the diverse situations and experiences of women in different parts of the world, noting the multiple and intersecting identities held by women in public life – including age, class, racial or ethnic identities, sexual orientation and gender identities and those living with disabilities – as well as the different inequalities they face in various aspects of public life relating to their social location.

The EGM also considered the erosion of democracy and rise of authoritarian politics in many parts of the world, and that increased numbers of women participating in public life have rarely prevented a regression in gender equality. The EGM observed the role feminist organizations play in supporting and amplifying the work of women in public life, including their calls for more open and enabling environments, safe spaces online and offline for organizing, and more support for capacity-building. The pressing issue of violence against women in political and public life was raised throughout, with particular attention focused on its causes, manifestations, effects and ways to prevent it, as well as concerns about gender-based violence in contexts of democratic backsliding.

The EGM developed action-oriented recommendations to address gaps and support implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

* **Report of the Expert Group Meeting, 5–8 October 2020.**

make in salary. Usually, this decision makes sense for the long haul, because of the ample evidence that mothers are financially penalized for taking time out of the workforce, and childcare costs go down when children enter school. Although, without school, the calculation implodes. If families can even get childcare, the high expenses sum up with more housework to be done and more child-related tasks to complete.

Policy makers should focus on mothers to determine how families are coping with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis response consequences. They should keep in mind that the family unit is the best means for social change and, within families, mothers often take on more responsibility when it comes to childcare and household chores, and they tend to be the decision makers in the family. Mothers are the key to family care, health and cohesion. So, by focusing on mothers, we are getting a good look at how the post-pandemic era will be.

Mothers struggling at home

Women have long done an unequal share of childcare, compared to men, and the pandemic isn't different. With schools and daycares closed, the pandemic has caused tremendous changes in mothers' childcare responsibilities, which are taking a tremendous toll on mothers' relationships and wellbeing. According to Raquel Lagunas, director of the gender team at the United Nations Development Programme, "because of their reproductive role in society, they are the ones taking care of the kids, the house, the food, the survival of families."

In this regard, mothers are spending more time caring for their children, and others are simply having a hard time negotiating a good balance of childcare with their spouse/partner while working at home. These changes are causing a significant increase in stress for women and are exacerbated in situations where they feel that their spouses/partners are not doing enough to help with the new childcare responsibilities. In some parts of the world, mothers are considering quitting their jobs scaling back their work hours so that they can continue providing full-time care or even homeschooling for their children long-term.

Some studies are examining how disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic are creating conflicts for couples with young children. Pre-pandemic research suggests that pandemic-related disruptions may create conflicts around paid work and parenting, economic security, politics, and health decision-making. For example, mothers are extremely or very concerned about the virus considering the most trusted news sources to be public health agencies, spouses/partners and family healthcare providers. Various results have reported a substantial number of mothers with pandemic-related increases in their frustrations with their partners. These frustrations are particularly common among women whose partners are providing insufficient support with pandemic parenting or dismissing mothers' concerns

about COVID-19. They usually blame themselves for these conflicts and feel responsible for reducing them, including by leaving the workforce, beginning use of antidepressants, or ignoring their own concerns about COVID-19.

Women are disproportionately expected to shoulder the burdens of household and caregiving responsibilities during the workweek and are experiencing more reported feelings of anxiety than men. Significantly more mothers than fathers find it difficult to “switch off” their mind from work at the end of the day; mothers usually do most of the childcare tasks, whereas fathers are more likely to expect their partner to manage tasks across the board; mothers worry more than fathers that they would not be able to support their children with school tasks as much as they need to. Mothers are also more likely than fathers to feel guilty when working because they are not able to attend to caregiving responsibilities.

It is clear that this crisis has exacerbated long-standing sources of conflict related to partners’ insufficient support with parenting and created new sources of conflict related to partners’ dismissals of mothers’ concerns about COVID-19, with serious implications for mothers, families, and public health. It is crucial that, looking at the way families, particularly mothers, make decisions during times like this, can help us determine what messaging is necessary and what source mothers will turn to in protecting themselves and in turn, their communities.

Challenges of mothers in the workplace

Women accounted for more than half of the jobs lost since the beginning of the pandemic with their unemployment rate surpassing men’s. This has been called a “shecession” by Nicole Mason, president and chief executive of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, in a nod to the 2008 recession that came to be known as the “mancession” because more men were affected. In this recession, female-dominated jobs, like hospitality or child care, tend to also be underpaid and undervalued, which means that many of the newly unemployed women now have less of a financial cushion to fall back on. Without mentioning that young women are more likely to be unemployed than young men, increasing the pressure over single-mothers and recently formed young families.

In the workplace, both mothers and fathers may feel that being a parent is a strike against them during the pandemic. And both mothers and fathers may fear taking advantage of parental benefits offered, as it has been the case in many other situations. During the crisis, parents are caught in a difficult predicament, tasked with making challenging decisions about their family and career daily. That is why, regardless of gender and race, parents may fear they will be negatively affected by employer decisions because they are parents. Particularly,

Families in a changing world *

Today, there are many indications that women are increasingly able to exercise agency and voice within their families. These include the rising age of marriage; greater social and legal recognition of a diversity of partnership forms; declines in birth rates as women are better able to choose whether and when to have children, and how many; and women’s increased economic autonomy. These transformations are both causes and consequences of large-scale demographic changes, dramatic shifts in women’s and girls’ access to education and employment, ideological and normative changes, and legal reform, often driven and inspired by women’s activism.

This activism and a strong reaffirmation of human rights values are needed more than ever, in a context in which backlash against the gains that have been made is growing stronger by the day. Confronted efforts to roll back the achievements of many decades of work for gender equality, by those who deny women the right to make their own decisions, have recently been cloaked in the rhetoric of ‘family values’. In reality, the proponents of these views have not only sought to undermine women’s rights, but have simultaneously adopted policies that erode the conditions that enable families and their members to thrive.

Families are a key building block of societies, without which communities and economies could not function. It is through families that people share resources such as housing and income, look after those who are sick and frail, and reproduce, nurture and care for the next generation. Families can be places of love and affection, and pivotal for each member’s sense of identity and belonging. However, within families, women and girls too often face violence and discrimination. Over their lifetimes, around one in three women can expect to experience physical or sexual abuse at the hands of an intimate partner. In some countries, girls are not able to inherit property, while in others, women are required by law to obey their husbands, their voices stifled and their agency eroded. The recognition of families as a contradictory space for women and girls is at the heart of this Report.

The inequality, discrimination and disadvantage that women and girls can face in their family lives and relationships are neither natural, nor inevitable. Therefore, the urgent challenge for policymakers, activists and people in all walks of life, is to transform families into places of equality and justice, a springboard from which women and girls can realize their rights.

* UN Women, ‘Families in a changing world’, Report on the Progress of the World’s Women 2019–2020.

mothers are not aware of the plans their employers have in place for parents, or know that these plans simply do not exist at their company. They are relying for support on their work relationships, such as their managers or work colleagues.

As many other citizens, parents have reasons to believe their performance has suffered as a result of the pandemic, and they will have now to rethink their futures. A large number of senior-level mothers have reported that they have been unable to perform optimally. Parents are anxious about less job security and fear being penalized because they have childcare responsibilities. While all parents are under enormous strain, it is clear that, generally speaking, mothers are bearing a greater burden than fathers, as they are disproportionately expected to fulfill household and caregiving responsibilities during the workweek. Moreover, mothers tend to hide their caregiving struggles from their colleagues.

Mothers' predicaments: childcare and education

Child care facilities are slowly reopening, but they serve just a fraction of the number they enrolled before the pandemic, and their financial futures are uncertain. The industry already operates at the margins, and facilities that are open are running under capacity to comply with strict health guidelines. Many centers have delayed paying their rent or mortgages until they can afford it.

Owners say that many workers have left for babysitting gigs or other minimum-wage jobs that reopened sooner.

Sadly, mothers receive less workplace support than fathers do in managing childcare. According to working mothers, employers either have no plans in place to help with childcare or they have not been made aware of such plans. Among those whose employers do have plans, more flexible schedules are the most common solution. Still, just a low percentage of mothers have reported that their employer has been moderately or very proactive in expanding parental benefits since the pandemic began.

On the other hand, uncertainty around schooling has altered many parents' lives. They face tough decisions about their children's educational plans, and many choose to place their children in 100% remote learning during the pandemic, they are facing very

real challenges in their careers, in their caregiving roles, and in their personal development.

Conclusion

The pandemic has made it more difficult for parents to deal with the strain of juggling family and work. Most mothers and fathers have had to modify their work routines to adapt to caregiving needs and balance their family responsibilities. This disruption has left parents across genders, races, ethnicities and job levels feeling guilty about caregiving responsibilities.

Even as schools reopen, most children will be engaging in virtual learning. Additionally, many parents worry about the impact on their careers of the pandemic and uncertainty about school reopening. Parents are concerned that they are not currently performing to the best of their abilities and that the Covid-19 crisis will affect their job security and career growth.

Many parents have also experienced intense personal challenges due to the coronavirus crisis, including suffering grief due to a loss of life. Overall, many have experienced financial hardship, with some having lost job-related income or faced difficulty getting needed resources. In particular, some parents report having had to move their residence or ask a relative to move in with them to receive support.

The fact is that mothers are experiencing a greater burden than fathers throughout the workweek, such as preparing meals, supervising homework, and even monitoring playtime with their children. Mothers feel more guilt in attempting to meet work-life demands, and experience more feelings of anxiety.

Companies must do more to communicate and enhance their programs, as well as to create psychologically safe spaces for parents to take advantage of these options. Doing so will smooth the path towards a more fair, inclusive, and responsive workplace in these uncertain times.

Parents, and especially mothers, need more work-related support and communication. To alleviate the challenges parents are facing, the public and the private sectors must provide increased transparency around available benefits and create an environment in which employees do not feel they are faulted for being parents. Communication needs to be empathetic toward their concerns and delivered both as overall company directives and through more personal channels.

Recent and Upcoming Events

All Recent and Upcoming Events will be digital

Recent

- June 03.-04.: International Conference on Family Studies and Community
<https://waset.org/family-studies-and-community-conference-in-june-2021-in-new-york>
- June 03.-04.: International Conference on Nutritional Epidemiology and Malnutrition
<https://waset.org/nutritional-epidemiology-and-malnutrition-conference-in-june-2021-in-new-york>

June

- June 10.-11.: International Conference on Current Research in Nutrition and Dietetics
<https://waset.org/current-research-in-nutrition-and-dietetics-conference-in-june-2021-in-barcelona>
- June 10.-11.: International Conference on Children's and Adolescent's Health and Mental Health
<https://waset.org/childrens-and-adolescents-health-and-mental-health-conference-in-june-2021-in-copenhagen>
- June 14.-15.: International Conference on Gender, Women and Feminism Studies
<https://waset.org/gender-women-and-feminism-studies-conference-in-june-2021-in-montreal>
- June 21.-22.: International Conference on Malnutrition and Health in Developing Countries
<https://waset.org/malnutrition-and-health-in-developing-countries-conference-in-june-2021-in-venice>

July

- July 19.-20.: International Conference on Styles of Marriage
<https://waset.org/styles-of-marriage-conference-in-july-2021-in-copenhagen>

August

- July 19.-20.: International Conference on Children's Health and Family
<https://waset.org/childrens-health-and-family-conference-in-july-2021-in-helsinki>

September

- September 16.-17.: International Conference on Obesity in Children
<https://waset.org/obesity-in-children-conference-in-september-2021-in-amsterdam>
- September 23.-24.: International Conference on Family Studies, Structures and Classification
<https://waset.org/family-studies-structures-and-classification-conference-in-september-2021-in-london>

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