



FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES AND OTHER GOOD WORKPLACE PRACTICES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19:

Key steps employers can take



INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS, 27 MARCH 2020

This document builds on material developed by UNICEF EAPRO, UNICEF ESARO and the ILO. It is an interim guidance note, developed in a fast-evolving situation. It provides general recommendations that aim to help employers strengthen support for workers and their families. It needs to be adapted locally and to rapidly changing contexts. As the information contained in this document may date quickly, you are advised to check the sources and online information (via links) regularly.



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The consequences of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak are unprecedented and felt around the world. The pandemic is heavily affecting labour markets and economies, including global supply chains, leading to widespread business disruptions. With many businesses struggling to survive, loss of jobs and income and rising working poverty are a reality for many workers.¹ Self-employed, domestic and care workers and those in casual or temporary agency employment are at particular risk.² The absence of adequate social protection systems exacerbates working families' vulnerability to the crisis.

For many children and their families, the fast-evolving situation means disrupted education and childcare, family illness and potential loss of household income. Restrictions on free movement and the socio-economic fallout of the crisis put children at heightened risk of abuse, neglect and

violence.³ In the context of school and childcare closures, domestic care responsibilities for working parents, especially women, have increased considerably during the crisis.

By giving working parents the time, information, services and resources they need to cope with the crisis, [family-friendly policies](#) and practices can make a critical difference. They also make an important contribution to wider social protection. Employment and income protection, paid leave to care for family members, flexible working arrangements and access to quality, emergency childcare are important measures that enable workers to protect and care for themselves, their children and their relatives. Employers can also play an important role in gathering and reporting sex-disaggregated data on how the situation is particularly affecting women.

This document offers (interim) recommendations for employers to mitigate the negative consequences stemming from COVID-19.

¹ The ILO estimates that up to 25 million jobs globally are at risk due to the COVID-19 pandemic. ILO (18 March 2020), [Covid-19 and world of work: Impacts and Responses](#).

² See ILO (20 March): [Precarious work pushed to the edge by COVID-19](#).

³ See UNICEF (20 March): [COVID-19: Children at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence amidst intensifying containment measures](#).

General considerations

✓ Closely monitor and follow advice by national and local authorities

- Monitor advice provided by national and local authorities (e.g. on public health measures and work arrangements) and communicate critical information to the workforce.
- Assess potential risks of business disruption and review or draw up a business continuity plan that is consistent with guidance from national and local authorities.
- Seek advice and support from employer and business membership organizations who can channel concerns to the government and shape policy measures that support business resilience and the situation of workers and their families.

✓ Assess whether current workplace policies provide sufficient support to workers and their families

- Identify the most pressing needs of workers and their families by carrying out meaningful, contextually relevant social dialogue. Directly engage with workers and their representatives (e.g. trade unions), including virtually where necessary, about workers' immediate needs.
- Focus specifically on gender-sensitive measures and vulnerable and/or marginalized groups. Among others, this can include informal, temporary, young/older, migrant, pregnant or nursing workers, single parents, health and care workers and those who lack entitlements to employer benefits. Particular focus should also be placed on workers with disabilities or those who have children with disabilities.

✓ Apply good practices when implementing existing or new policies

- Ensure measures are framed in line with national labour laws and international labour standards and grounded in worker engagement and social dialogue. International labour standards provide a strong foundation to mitigate the negative consequences for workers and their families.
- Gather and report on sex-disaggregated data related to evolving rates of infection, economic impacts, care burden, and the incidence of sexual violence and abuse.
- Ensure all workers are entitled to workplace support measures, and that all workers know about them, understand them and feel comfortable using them.
- Apply measures for all workers (employees and non-employees), without discrimination of any kind, with a focus on the most disadvantaged (e.g. less protected and low paid).
- Ensure gender parity and diversity in all decision-making as it pertains to monitoring and collecting information, and feeding back into policy advice processes.
- Assess the efficacy and inclusivity of workplace support measures via consultation with workers' representatives, including virtually where necessary, and quickly adapt where needed.
- As relevant, consider the social consequences of business decisions on partners, including in global supply chains. Maintaining business relationships and order volumes and assisting suppliers with technical support can help mitigate negative secondary consequences for workers and their families.

✓ Protect the workplace against discrimination and social stigma

- Implement measures to prevent and address discrimination, violence and harassment in the workplace (in the context of COVID-19 and beyond).
- Provide trainings to workers to reduce social stigma and prevent discrimination, violence and harassment against workers and/or their family members associated with COVID-19.
- Encourage workers to be proactive in reporting incidents of inappropriate, discriminatory, harassing or abusive behaviour to their supervisor, HR department, union or management.
- Take steps to ensure that reporting mechanisms are confidential, gender-sensitive and safe. Encourage the wide and non-discriminative use of these mechanisms and ensure they are easily accessible by all, including persons with disabilities, migrants and minority groups.
- Identify cases of discrimination and promptly act upon them.

Specific steps employers can take

1 Implement flexible work arrangements

If properly designed, flexible work arrangements give workers greater freedom of when and where to fulfil their job responsibilities. They support workers to meet personal or family needs and achieve better work-life balance. They also enhance workers' productivity in challenging circumstances. Flexible work arrangements are particularly important in the context of widespread school closures and restricted childcare options.

- Undertake an organizational assessment to determine what kind of flexible scheduling will best meet the needs of workers, including parents and those with other family responsibilities such as caring for elderly or sick family members, in the context of the crisis, while ensuring business continuity.
- Provide flexible work arrangements that respond to the need of workers and their families. Arrangements can include, for example, teleworking (see [ILO guidance](#)), flexi-time and reduced workload (see table below). Flexible work arrangements should be based on social dialogue and consultation with workers and their representatives.
- Apply time flexibility (and where possible, location flexibility) in case of teleworking, so working parents can work at the time and in the place most convenient for them. Agree on priority tasks to support workers to be as productive as possible in the context of additional care and family responsibilities. Ensure that all supervisors demonstrate flexibility in cases of teleworking.
- Ensure working parents have enough time to support their children's learning and development, and to spend time with their children to cope with stress. In case of family illness or separation, ensure paid time off to allow workers to care for and maintain contact with family members without jeopardizing income security.
- If flexible working arrangements are not possible, consider alternative support for working parents such as childcare support (see section on childcare below).

Examples of flexible work arrangements

FLEX TIME	FLEX TIME OFF	FLEX LOCATION/ROLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Banking of working hours • Compressed work week • Flexible working hours • Job sharing • Switch shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paid sick leave • Paid emergency care leave • Extra or prolonged holiday or personal leave • Long-term leave with employment protection • Reduced hours (part-time) with the same hourly rate • Paid lactation breaks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telework or telecommuting • Temporary remote work for caring purposes • Change of responsibilities



Specific steps employers can take

2 Support working parents with childcare options that are safe and appropriate in the context of COVID-19

Childcare is an integral part of family-friendly policies by supporting parents in providing stimulation and responsive care for young children while they work. In the context of widespread school and childcare closures, employers can provide critical support to parents who are faced with limited or no childcare options. Some parents may even be compelled to leave younger children with limited supervision, which can compromise their safety.

- Bear in mind that childcare support can take multiple forms based on feasibility and workers' needs. Employers should ideally provide a mix of measures that reflect the varied needs of workers and their children, including by providing information on the availability of childcare services in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Consider measures that can include on-site childcare centres (as appropriate in the context of COVID-19), emergency childcare, schooling for front-line workers' children (including health workers and other care workers), childcare allowances, childcare referral systems and collaboration with external childcare providers for emergency situations (private or public).
- Consider that some parents prefer care arrangements closer to home, where they have trusted networks of support and/or when they are not able to or concerned about traveling with their child (e.g. long commutes, unsafe conditions, high costs). In such cases, ensure support through, for example, flexible work and childcare allowances.
- Ensure the coverage of workers most in need. Childcare support should cover as many working families as possible, particularly children from the most vulnerable families (e.g. low-income, migrant and informal workers, domestic and care workers, persons with disabilities, single-headed households and parents without support from extended family).
- Ensure that childcare is non-discriminatory, needs-based, accessible, affordable, safe and of high quality (for specific guidance, see [IFC Tackling Childcare: A Guide for Employer-Supported Childcare](#)).
- Ensure that jobs in the childcare sector are quality jobs. Quality childcare services rely on the adequate number and decent working conditions for childcare workers (for specific guidance, see [ILO Policy Guidelines on the promotion of decent work for early childhood education personnel](#)).

3 Prevent and address workplace risks by strengthening occupational safety and health measures

Protecting the health of workers, customers, users and other affected third parties should be the foremost priority of employers.

- Develop a preparedness and response plan for prevention of COVID-19, considering all worksites, tasks performed by workers and potential sources of exposure.
- Identify and mitigate all risks of exposure to workers and other persons connected to the workplace arising from COVID-19 in terms of person-to-person infection or contact with contaminated surfaces or objects.
- Develop a plan of what to do if a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 is identified at the workplace, including reporting, notification, monitoring, reorganization of work, and disinfection.
- Consult with workers, workers' representatives and safety and health committees, including virtually where necessary, on the measures to implement.
- Promote workplace hygiene and apply relevant principles to ensure physical distancing in the workplace (see [WHO guidance](#)).
- Ensure the availability of hand-washing facilities with soap and maintain and regularly clean shops, facilities and workplaces. Hand-washing facilities should be located near areas that are critical for hand washing (e.g. toilets, health clinic facilities, building entrances, meeting areas, cafeterias/canteens).

3 Prevent and address workplace risks by strengthening occupational safety and health measures (continued)

- Provide signage at hand-washing facilities that demonstrate proper hand-washing techniques and critical times for hand washing (see [WHO guidance](#)).
- Make available alcohol-based hand rubs (minimum 60 per cent alcohol) and strongly encourage their use where hand-washing facilities are not available.
- Ensure that face masks and/or paper tissues are available at your workplaces for those who develop respiratory symptoms (e.g. coughing or sneezing) along with closed bins for hygienically disposing of them.
- Increase the frequency of cleaning common areas and repeatedly touched surfaces (e.g. door handles, elevator buttons).
- Provide personal protective equipment, as required, namely for suspected cases and occupations at special risks (e.g.: waste management, health care).
- Ensure special health and safety measures for frontline health workers – many of whom are women (see text box below).
- Ensure maternity protection (including in relation to occupational safety and health) for all women everywhere, at the minimum in line with [ILO Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 \(No. 183\)](#) and its accompanying [Recommendation No. 191](#).
- Where available, maintain clean breastfeeding rooms where women can express milk. The rooms should be equipped with disinfecting wipes, a trash bin with a lid, hand sanitizer with at least 60 per cent alcohol, and access to hand-washing facilities (see UNICEF [COVID-19 What parents should know](#) and [WHO Q&A on pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding in the context of COVID-19](#)).
- Support pregnant women to take precautionary measures to protect themselves and report possible symptoms to their healthcare provider. Due to changes in their bodies and immune system, pregnant women may be more susceptible to respiratory infections, including COVID-19 (see [WHO Q&A on pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding in the context of COVID-19](#)).
- Clean on-site childcare facilities and equip them with clean water, soap and hand cleaning with alcohol-based hand rubs (minimum of 60 per cent alcohol).

Women form the majority of the health workforce around the world. As doctors, nurses and community health workers, they are on the front lines of the response. According to the WHO, women make up the majority of workers in the health and social care sector – 70 per cent in 104 countries analysed by the WHO.⁴ They also earn 11 per cent less than men in the same sector.⁵ Many of these women are volunteers and must also take care of their own families. Many are putting their own lives at risk as they serve others, often without any care or support mechanisms in place. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, Chinese authorities sent more than 41,000 health workers from around the country to support medical staff at the epicentre of the outbreak in Hubei province. More than half of the doctors and 90 per cent of the nurses in Hubei were women, according to the Shanghai Women's Federation, a government body.⁶



4 <apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-eng.pdf?ua=1>

5 <[www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30526-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30526-2/fulltext)>

6 <www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/the-coronavirus-fallout-may-be-worse-for-women-than-men-heres-why>

4 Provide guidance and training on occupational safety and health measures and hygiene practices

Physical distancing, hand washing and hygiene education are critical ways to avoid spreading COVID-19 infections.

- Distribute educational leaflets and training, where necessary, for workers to support occupational safety and health measures, hygiene practices and other measures to protect themselves, their families and communities. Display banners on walls with prevention and protection advice. Messaging should follow [WHO advice for the public](#).
- For messaging to protect children, see [UNICEF coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\): What parents should know and how to protect themselves and their children](#).
- For working mothers who are breastfeeding, encourage and support them to continue breastfeeding. Facilities for breastfeeding or milk expression should include the necessary items for adequate hygiene, including disinfecting wipes, a trash bin with a lid, hand sanitizer with at least 60 per cent alcohol, and access to hand-washing facilities.
- Advise symptomatic mothers well enough to breastfeed to wear a mask when near a child (including during feeding) and to wash their hands before and after contact with the child. Support symptomatic mothers to seek early medical care, and to follow the instructions from a health care provider (see [UNICEF guidance for parents](#)).
- Where meals are offered at the workplace, practice food safety. This includes advising workers with appropriate precautions for handling raw meat, milk or animal organs to avoid cross-contamination with uncooked foods, as per food safety practices and [WHO guidelines](#).

5 Encourage workers to seek appropriate medical care in cases of fever, cough and difficulty breathing

In the absence of a vaccine, reducing the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus is the safest way to prevent infection. Where workers develop symptoms, encourage them to seek appropriate medical care.

- Provide workers with guidance on where they can be referred if they present symptoms consistent with COVID-19 (address and phone number of local hospitals, health authorities, emergency hotlines). Assist in safe transport for referral wherever possible and needed.
- Referrals should also be provided for other services, e.g. hotlines for domestic violence, counselling for mental health and psychosocial support (see [Inter-Agency Standing Committee briefing note](#)).
- Advise asymptomatic workers with a travel history to affected areas to follow the same precautions as everyone else (i.e. guidance/support for referral). However, depending on policies of local health authorities, they may be placed in quarantine – and thus require support for access to food, water, accommodation, telecommunication services, medical services, mental health and psychosocial support, etc. For more guidance, see [WHO considerations for repatriation and quarantine of travellers](#).
- Ensure that workers presenting any symptoms are also provided with psychological support.

6 Support workers coping with stress and personal safety during the COVID-19 outbreak

Potential risk of unemployment and workplace inflexibility can increase parenting stress, which has an impact on parenting practices and parent-child relationships.

- Contribute to reducing stress by reposting evidence-based information from reliable sources (e.g. WHO). Unverified information from mass media and social media posts can create unnecessary panic or stress.
- Provide workers, especially women, with information, counseling and access to services. Women face increased risks of domestic violence and sexual exploitation in times of crisis when households and families are under increased strain.⁷
- Gather information that will help workers under stress to accurately understand and cope with risks.
- Support workers in helping their children cope with stress during the COVID-19 outbreak. Give working parents the time and resources they need to comfort and care for their children. This can also include providing tools and material that encourage talk, play and other forms of stimulation that children need.
- For recommendations on how to communicate with children, see [UNICEF: How to talk to your child about coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#).
- Provide workers with sound suggestions on how to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Specific steps employers can take

⁷ <apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-eng.pdf?ua=1>

Specific steps employers can take

7 Support government social protection measures

Social protection plays a central role in addressing vulnerabilities of workers and their families to poverty, inequality and deprivation, particularly in the context of COVID-19. While social protection is a government responsibility, family-friendly policies in the workplace can support these efforts.

- Identify ways to support government social protection measures in line with [ILO Social Security \(Minimum Standards\) Convention No. 102](#) and [ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation No. 202](#). Company support can include, for example, subsidies for workers to access health, unemployment and invalidity insurance, and should extend to workers in the informal sector.
- Provide cash transfers to workers in the form of child benefits and other payments that improve the resilience of families, especially the most disadvantaged.
- In case of worker or family illness, reduce the potential financial implications by guaranteeing paid sick leave, especially for women who are often the primary caregiver, allowing families to maintain their livelihoods.

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USEFUL ONLINE RESOURCES

WHO coronavirus resources:

www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus

CDC Coronavirus Disease 2019:

www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/index.html

WHO getting your workplace ready:

www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=359a81e7_6

UNICEF coronavirus disease (COVID-19) – what parents should know:

www.unicef.org/stories/novel-coronavirus-outbreak-what-parents-should-know

How to talk to your child about coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19):

www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-talk-your-child-about-coronavirus-covid-19

WHO Q&A on COVID-19, pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding:

www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-on-covid-19-pregnancy-childbirth-and-breastfeeding

Protecting children during the coronavirus pandemic:

[www.unicef.org/media/65991/file/Technical%20note:%20Protection%20of%20children%20during%20the%20coronavirus%20disease%202019%20\(COVID-19\)%20pandemic.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/65991/file/Technical%20note:%20Protection%20of%20children%20during%20the%20coronavirus%20disease%202019%20(COVID-19)%20pandemic.pdf)

ILO COVID-19 and the world of work – impacts and responses:

www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--dgreports/--dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_738753.pdf

UN Women gender in COVID-19 response

www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response

Five things to know for effective teleworking during the COVID-19 crisis:

www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/multimedia/video/institutional-videos/WCMS_738575/lang-en/index.htm

Mental health and psychological support considerations in the context of COVID-19:

[www.unicef.org/media/65916/file/Briefing note on addressing mental health and psycosocial aspects of COVID-19 outbreak.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/65916/file/Briefing%20note%20on%20addressing%20mental%20health%20and%20psycosocial%20aspects%20of%20COVID-19%20outbreak.pdf)

WHO coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public – myth busters:

www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters

Advice for health workers:

www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-rights-roles-respon-hw-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=bcabd401_0

ILO care work and care jobs for the future of decent work:

www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_633115/lang-en/index.htm

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