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# How Do Care Deficits Affect Firms in Middle Income Countries?

By Sarah Gammage and Naziha Sultana

Care deficits disproportionately affect women and those they care for. Around the world, the failure to provide access to quality care for the young, old, sick and disabled, [underpins pronounced differences in women's labor force participation, contributes to sex-segregated labor markets and exacerbates gender wage gaps.](#)

The public provision of quality care and universal access to quality care should be a right. Yet it is not. Despite the exhortations to [Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute and Represent](#) the burdens of unpaid care work and project the voices of paid care workers into policy discourse, few countries recognize the right to care and be cared for.

The [International Center for Research on Women](#) (ICRW) has been working with the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#) (EBRD) to explore how investing in care services and reducing care burdens can potentially increase women's labor force participation in Romania, Kazakhstan, Egypt and Turkey. The goal of the project is to explore whether and how the private sector identifies and addresses the

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care needs and care responsibilities of workers as being an important factor that limits their ability to hire, retain and promote women in their operations. Part of this work includes forecasting how, if care needs were resolved and care deficits reduced, [women's labor force participation could rise](#). Another strand of research explores the extent to which the failure to resolve care deficits affects the firm, and, exacerbates turnover, reduces women's labor market attachment and imposes costs of onboarding and productivity loss -- even in small and medium size companies in low skilled sectors.

The EBRD operates in many countries that currently don't have enough public investment in care provision. Employers can help address care needs through a host of policies that they can deploy, including flexible working schedules, family and medical leave, gradual return to work, on-site provision of care and partnerships with government, municipalities or non-profit entities to provide childcare. They can also work with the public sector to expand the supply of publicly available childcare.

Our research shows that provision of childcare costs a small fraction of the costs that businesses incur from turnover of women that leave due to care burdens.

For example, in Turkey, our findings for a medium-sized agri-business company of about 800 employees, over 70 percent of whom are women, underscored that turnover did pose a meaningful cost for this employer. The company provides maternity benefits in accordance with the law: 16 weeks of paid maternity leave with provisions of another 6 months of unpaid leave. Breastfeeding mothers can take 1.5 hours daily to nurse until the child is 1 year old. Fathers are given 5 days of paid paternity leave. The company does not provide childcare services or subsidies.

We found that once parental leave is over, many

women do not return to work. Employees generally depend on family members, including older children in the house, for childcare. Public childcare and education become available from when children are 5 years and older. However, school hours are generally shorter than work hours, so family members must still help with drop-off and pick-ups. It is clear that where support mechanisms are not available, women frequently quit their jobs to take care of their children.

The women employed at this company are mostly seasonal workers and are disproportionately represented in lower skilled and manual-labor positions. In 2017, the company faced a turnover rate of over 26 percent of all women employees. We worked closely with the human resources team and conducted interviews with workers and managers about care needs and the consequences of not having access to sufficient care services.

In this small company, we found that 91 women quit every year for care-related burdens. The direct cost of recruitment and training and the lost productivity, as workers gradually acquired all the skills required to operate at full productivity, came to about USD \$971,357 a year. This represented 14 percent of the company's annual revenue. The average cost of childcare per year for a child aged 6 months to 3 years is USD \$1,100 ([USD \\$650 for public centers and USD \\$1,500 for private centers](#)). Demonstrating that the cost of childcare lies below the total cost to this firm of failing to accommodate workers care needs.

How a [firm accommodates workers' childcare needs](#) can vary. One approach is through more flexible working policies. Flexible working policies allow employees to have greater control over starting and finishing times, which shifts the work, and the number of hours and/or location of work, in order to help caregivers accommodate their care needs. There has been a belief that this



policy is only really appropriate for higher skilled and knowledge producing sectors where telecommuting is seen as more viable. But the application of flexible working policies can also be effective in lower skilled sectors. The key is to engage workers in problem-solving about how the policy can function, and ensure that the benefit is widely available to all workers, men and women.

Ensuring access to childcare at or near employees' workplaces can also be attractive for new parents. Direct provision of care, however, can be resource intensive, and having a workplace childcare center may not be feasible in all locations in which an employer operates. Another option is for companies to partner with local childcare providers for near-site childcare.

Companies can also support shared care arrangements between parents and the firm to be more cost effective. In this scenario, companies provide a space for childcare and pay for some staff, while parents manage the center and provide some of the childcare themselves. This model can work in combination with flexible working options for parents not in full-time employment.

The extent to which employers are able to address workers' care needs also depends on the legal obligations and mandates and the ecosystem of care available in each context. What are firms legally required to do? Which body or entity regulates care and oversees its quality?

Our findings demonstrate that as long as meeting care needs remains a matter for workers and households to resolve as best they can, the costs to firms will not be trivial and that employers have a substantial stake in addressing their workers' care needs and advocating for universal access to quality care.



Photo credit: ICRW

*Sarah Gammage is Director of Gender, Economic Empowerment and Livelihoods at ICRW.*



Photo credit: ICRW

*Naziha Sultana is a Gender and Economics Specialist at ICRW.*



# Q&A with Editors Mahnaz Afkhami, Yakin Ertürk and Ann Elizabeth Mayer

## Interview by Kate Grantham

In *Feminist Advocacy, Family Law and Violence Against Women: International Perspectives* (2018), editors Mahnaz Afkhami, Yakin Ertürk and Ann Elizabeth Mayer bring together research by local women's rights experts and practitioners to demonstrate the harms caused by discriminatory family laws in a variety of global settings, and their impact on violence against women (VAW) specifically and how women strategized for change. Using case studies from Brazil, India, Iran, Lebanon, Nigeria, Palestine, Senegal and Turkey, and interviews with women's rights activists in three additional countries, the collection provides a road map for feminist advocacy, for family law reform and gender equality. I had the opportunity to speak with the editors about the motivation, process and findings of their work.

**Q: This book, a joint project by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Women's Learning Partnership (WLP), is based on interdisciplinary research conducted in eleven countries. What was your motivation for publishing this vast collection of work?**

In the struggle to combat VAW, family laws - which are at the heart of patriarchal relations that condone violence to subordinate women - became a contested site. After decades of activism, an assessment of the historic progress (or lack of it) made in different countries is called

for. One of the book's goals is to debunk common misconceptions about women and violence, particularly the belief that deep cultural divides determine where problems of VAW arise; in reality, appraisal of legal texts and cross cultural analysis demonstrate that the patterns in the abuse of patriarchal dominance are remarkably similar.

The chapters in this volume illustrate different approaches that women in a variety of cultures have relied on to surmount similar challenges in their campaigns against VAW. They provide an opportunity to revisit commonalities that underlie gender structures while capturing the multiplicity of women's experiences under considerably different socio-political contexts. Each case raises legitimate epistemological and ethical questions concerning the universalist / relativist debates and opens new areas of thinking for both feminist theorizing and praxis. On the other hand, we emphasize that the case studies were envisaged as the research component of a larger project, namely WLP's global campaign on feminist advocacy for family law reform. The rich research evidence and lessons learned from the diverse experiences will offer valuable ideas for the design of the campaign.

**Q. The book concludes with interviews from prominent women's rights activists detailing their past successes and failures in advancing legal reform agendas. Why did you feel these interviews were an important addition to the country case studies?**

The aim of the interviews was to complement and enrich the overviews of the campaigns waged to combat VAW in various societies by giving voice to those who actively engaged in the grassroots reform movements and assumed national leadership in this regard. The interviewees portrayed in the book possess unique experiences as activists, scholars and leaders. Their stories illustrate the specific and arduous problems that they have faced and the multi-faceted strategizing that was used to shape



and promote local reform measures aimed at ending VAW. The breadth of their experiences provides a helpful background for understanding the process of feminist advocacy for reform in diverse contexts.

**Q. Throughout the book, you argue that this is a “critical moment” for understanding both the role of family law in facilitating discrimination and violence against women, and the role of international feminist advocacy to reform family law. Why is this a critical moment?**

With an enhanced awareness of the need for reforming family laws, women around the world are mobilizing to divest men of patriarchal powers enshrined in law, policy and practice that accommodate the use of violence to perpetuate women’s subjugation. Dramatic actual cases discussed in the book have highlighted how legal rules subjugating women in the family leave them dependent and exposed to violence. An apt example is the notorious 2019 Rahaf Al-Qunun case, where an abused Saudi teenager, effectively imprisoned in her family circle due to patriarchal guardianship laws, had to flee overseas in her efforts to escape the environment that left her trapped in a slave-like status.

The success of the global women’s movement and women’s uncompromising individual and collective resistance to patriarchal control have threatened the established order that relies on women’s subordination, whether within or outside the home. Women’s challenges to family laws that perpetuate their subjugation have angered guardians of patriarchy who are determined to stifle such challenges. In many countries, women demanding a rollback of discriminatory laws now face a backlash from individual men as well as from some governments who remain wedded to the idea that the use of force to uphold gender hierarchies is appropriate.

Although women human rights activists have made many advances in curbing VAW, they now

must deal with an energized resistance that seeks to restore the status quo, thus the space for civic activism is increasingly shrinking. Unfortunately, the current neoliberal economic environment, the security landscape, and the rise of right-wing politics have presented impediments to advancing women’s rights. Furthermore, the human rights momentum of the 1990s and the interconnectedness of the global women’s movement, which constituted important assets in the past, have also weakened. At this critical moment in history a re-imagined feminist vision and a new strategy for cross-border alliances will be vital in order to embrace the mounting challenges.

**Q. Who should read this book? Was it published with a particular audience in mind?**

The audience should include theorists and activists who are eager to get a fuller picture of the progress that women have made to date in countries around the globe in grappling with problems of VAW, those wanting to grasp the challenges that women’s rights advocates have faced in this regard and the strategies that they have utilized to overcome them, and those who seeking to identify the kinds of obstacles that remain to freeing women from the violence that blocks their path to equality and freedom. The book will also afford a resource for students of areas studies and social movements in general.

*Mahnaz Afkhami is Founder and President of Women’s Learning Partnership, and former Minister for Women’s Affairs in Iran.*

*Yakin Ertürk is a retired Professor of Sociology and former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences.*

*Ann Elizabeth Mayer is Associate Professor Emeritus of Legal Studies and Business Ethics at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, USA.*



# Exciting News From ISID's Women's Empowerment in Development Lab!

The Institute for the Study of International Development at McGill University is grateful and honored to officially announce that the Women's Empowerment in Development (WED) Lab is supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connection Grant! This virtual lab aims to bridge the gap between academics, practitioners and policy makers in Canada and globally on issues related to women's empowerment in developing countries.

Under this initiative, the WED Lab, in partnership with IDRC, will deliver a series of research-to-practice training seminars on core areas of research on women's empowerment. The seminars are free to attend and will be live streamed for remote viewing. They will feature expert panelists from the worlds of research, policy and practice.

The first seminar will be hosted on April 17, 2019 at the IDRC building in Ottawa. The topic for this seminar is "*Women's Economic Empowerment: What We Measure and Why It Matters.*" Registration is required. Visit the WED Lab [website](#) starting April 1 for more information or to register.



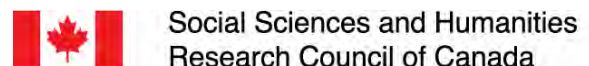
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