Changing the norms that make motherhood a barrier to decent work in Brazil

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- Increasing paternity leave or transitioning to shared parental leave can help diminish the prejudice towards women of reproductive age in the labor market.
- Ensuring that childcare is available, affordable and compatible with full-time work is important for allowing mothers, especially single-parents, to access decent work.

Key messages

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Pursuing gender equality in the workplace has become a guiding theme for various public policies in Brazil. It has shaped public discourse in recent years, particularly in light of the Sustainable Development Goals SDG-05 (gender equality) and SDG-08 (decent work and economic growth). Despite significant advancements, women still encounter numerous barriers that limit their access to decent jobs and equitable career opportunities.

Decent jobs encompass more than just fair compensation. The concept also entails:

- safe working conditions,
- social security,
- opportunities for professional growth, and
- a balance between work and personal life.

The factors that hinder Brazilian women from accessing jobs that meet these criteria can be analyzed through six dimensions:

1. legal barriers
2. social infrastructure to facilitate work-life balance
3. social norms outside workplaces
4. social norms within workplaces
5. COVID-19 impact
6. technology change impact.

The project

In 2022, a team of local PEP researchers set out to assess the main barriers that hinder Brazilian women from accessing decent work. Combining empirical evidence from qualitative and quantitative investigations, the research team analyzed the factors that have the greatest potential to affect women’s employment and the quality of women’s jobs.

Specifically, the team conducted and used a combination of interviews with relevant stakeholders, a web survey (with 741 respondents from across the country), focus group discussions, as well as an econometric analysis.

In the econometric analysis, the researchers linked the 2016-2021 Brazilian National Household Sample Survey database, comprising 3.6 million female workers, with other data sources to gain a deeper characterization of institutional (district level) and individual attributes.

For this analysis, “decent work” was defined for women in formal employment with a weekly workload of up to 44 hours.
Key findings

Discrimination

Access to decent work highlights disparities based on gender, income, and race.

Although equality between men and women is safeguarded by law, there is a mismatch between de jure and de facto legal protections for female workers. Subtle forms of discrimination against women in the labor market remain, hindering their hiring and career advancement. For example, when women report they are expecting a child, they are removed from the hiring list or any professional promotion.

Regarding perceptions of gender bias within workplaces:

• 83.4% of women believe that they are not heard and consulted in the workplace, compared to 49% of men who share this perception about female workers.

• 87.1% of women also consider that the professional skills of female workers are not recognized as those of men in the workplace, and 66% of men agree with them.

Parenthood

Workplace harassment tends to increase when women become mothers;

• 74% of women feel that having children hinders their career progression, vs 49% of men (who believe it affects theirs).

Approximately half of all households are headed by women, according to IBGE (the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), and 87% of the 12.7 million single-parent households are female-headed.

• Only 18% of female household heads have access to decent work, compared to 25% of male household heads.

Men and women agree that:

• women would have better chances of securing employment if shared parental leave policies were in place.

• the lack of childcare facilities is a significant barrier for women attaining decent work.

Pandemics

The pandemic had more consequences on women’s work than on men’s, for a variety of reasons, including:

• Family gender roles that make women chiefly responsible for unpaid care work, which increased during the pandemic.

• A high proportion of women in occupations that were severely affected by lockdowns and restrictions (i.e., not suitable for remote working).

• Domestic violence.

Figure 2: The summary of the results depicts the barriers that hinder various profiles of Brazilian women from attaining decent work

Prepared by the authors
Conclusions and policy implications

To support Brazilian women’s participation in decent work—encompassing the pillars of dignity, equality, fair income, and safe working conditions—it is necessary to establish the conditions that can ensure or increase their access to the labor market, job retention, and career advancement.

As the “child penalty” is greater for women than men, parenthood becomes a central issue in the challenge of providing decent work for women. Therefore, incentives are needed to place the responsibility for children on the family and society, rather than solely on mothers.

The findings from the study indicate that the following policies could help create the conditions to promote decent work for women:

1. Extend the operational hours of existing full-time public daycare centers to accommodate the 44-hour workweek of parents
   - Implementation should be managed at the municipal level although some investments can be managed by the states and the federal government.
   - Smaller municipalities will likely need a supplementary budget, however, the majority of women in Brazil live in medium-sized municipalities.

2. Modernize current maternity leave policies, moving towards shared parental leave and/or expanding paternity leave to promote greater workplace balance and strengthen family bonds
   - Congress would need to revisit some bills that address these topics and work on enforcing compliance with the legislation.

3. Encourage the adoption of more gender-equal social norms, supporting fathers’ greater involvement
   - For example, measures should encourage fathers’ involvement in prenatal care, medical appointments, and other aspects of their children’s lives and both parents should receive school/daycare notifications.
   - Cultural changes like these take time but the Ministries of Education and Health can encourage change by making recommendations to schools and healthcare centers. Private companies can be invited to participate in pilot initiatives.

This work was carried out with financial and technical support from the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP), with funding from Co-Impact. To find out more about the scientific research methods and findings, read the full PEP working paper.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of PEP.