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Lords Select Committee: Sub-Saharan Africa – prosperity, peace and development co-operation inquiry

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Introduction

1. We are both UK-based academics with doctorates in Social Statistics & Demography and research specialisms in population and family health in Sub-Saharan Africa.
2. This submission addresses the priority '*creating the conditions to allow the full participation of women and disabled persons in our society*' by presenting evidence on challenges faced by working mothers and opportunities to enable mothers to access and realise the benefits of decent work. This in turn will also contribute to the '*driving prosperity*' priority.

Rational for focus

3. Women's participation in the labour force can be a vehicle for gender equality and female empowerment. Female labour force participation in Sub-Saharan Africa is relatively high, averaging 61% (World Bank, 2019). Whilst there is diversity within the region, it is higher than the global average of 48% in over three quarters of countries in the region with available data (World Bank, 2019). However, labour force participation does not always translate into empowerment with factors such as decisions to work and work conditions and security being important in this relationship (Kabeer, 2005). Furthermore, the economic work that women perform may not be fully recognised or supported by family, society or policy (Chichester et al., 2017).
4. One key barrier for women realising their full potential in the labour market in Sub-Saharan Africa is the challenges associated with combining economic work and motherhood under current conditions. Women's role as workers can play an important role in economic development and poverty reduction, whilst their role as mothers can be critical to the achievement of goals related to children's health and development. Challenges combining these roles are faced by women globally, yet the extent to which work-family issues have been recognised in policy agendas is highly variable. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the highest fertility rates (5.1 children per woman in 2010-2015, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division,

2015) and highest share of its population living in extreme poverty (41.1% in 2015; Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). To date it is also a region where the dual roles of women as workers and mothers have received minimal research and policy attention. In the following sections we highlight five key challenges and three opportunities to enable working mothers to access and realise the benefits of decent work in the region, based on our own research and the work of others in the field.

Challenges amongst working mothers in Sub-Saharan Africa under current conditions

5. **Returns from mothers' work are important but do not always result in financial security.** Taking the example of South Africa, our research based on analysis of longitudinal nationally representative survey data shows that young women whose transition to adulthood is characterised by entry into motherhood followed by entry into work had the best self-rated health. In contrast, young women whose pathways featured motherhood with a lack of employment suffer poorer self-rated health (Bennett and Waterhouse, 2018). Research on transitions to adulthood in other settings suggests young people are vulnerable to poorer wellbeing when the situation they find themselves in does not allow them to fulfil their needs (Schulenberg et al., 2014). Labour force participation amongst mothers can be an important means for providing for children or in some cases households and can have benefits for wellbeing. Yet labour force participation does not necessarily equate to financial security, as articulated by mothers with young children (aged less than three years) self-employed in the informal sector interviewed in our research in Accra, Ghana (Waterhouse et al., 2017): "*Talking about this topic [combining economic work with childcare] it is all about money. You have to work to help yourself. If your business is not moving on, it is more hard. You need money for your children, for their schooling, for their food. So when you see your stall going down without improvement it can be very difficult*" [Water trader, Ga Mashie district, child 6-17 months, mother cares for child whilst working].
6. **Poor social protection for parents.** The International Labour Organisation's Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183) states that all countries, regardless of income, should guarantee women a minimum of 14 weeks of paid maternity leave. Whilst there has been progress in the legislation regarding paid maternity for women in Sub-Saharan Africa, maternity leave in some countries remains at less than 14 weeks and family leave beyond infancy is more limited (WORLD, 2019). Further, *an estimated 92% of working women in the region are engaged in the informal economy* (ILO, 2018) yet family leave policies often exclusively cover formal sector workers so are failing to support a large proportion of working mothers. Paternity leave does not exist in the majority of countries¹ in Sub-Saharan Africa (WORLD, 2019), reinforcing traditional gender norms.

¹ WORLD (2019) lists the following Sub-Saharan African countries as having paid paternity leave (all less than three weeks): Angola, Benin, Burundi, Cape Verde, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, The Gambia, Togo, Uganda.

7. **Limits to the compatibility of women's economic work and childcare.** Scholars have noted that the dominance of informal sector work for women in the region often leads to an assumption about the compatibility of women's work with childcare (Clark et al., 2019). Our research challenges this assumption. Working mothers of young children engaged in the informal sector in Accra, Ghana, who participated in focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews gave examples of challenges around breastfeeding and the 'distraction of children' resulting in loss of custom, and a potentially dangerous work environment for some, such as preparing hot food for sale (Waterhouse et al., 2017). In one example, this lack of compatibility was described as resulting in withdrawal from work: "*The way she [the participant's child] behaves, she cries a lot and because of that I stay at home.*" This concurs with findings from elsewhere in urban Africa (see Clark et al.'s 2018 research in Nairobi Kenya), and also research from rural Africa, showing that combining agricultural work and childcare contributes to lower productivity amongst female farmers relative to male farmers (see a recent report by World Bank and ONE (O'Sullivan et al., 2014) based on analysis of six Sub-Saharan African countries).
8. **Evolving challenges to extended family support with childcare.** Strong extended family support with childcare has been a well-documented characteristic of families in the region, yet there are also evolving challenges to this support, particularly changing family norms, migration patterns and population ageing (Mokomane, 2013). For example, female internal migration independent of men is a growing phenomenon in the region and can affect care and support networks (Andall, 2018).
9. **Unmet need for accessible and high-quality formal childcare.** There are some assertions that it is lack of support with childcare which means women are unable to seek more profitable, long-term and secure work if desired (Clark et al., 2018). Working mothers of young children who participated in focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews in our research in Accra, Ghana, perceived there to be benefits of day-care for children over three but also raised concerns about the quality of day-care and the consequences this might have for young infants (Waterhouse et al., 2017). The quality of childcare centres has also been called into question in other research (e.g. Clark et al.'s 2018 in Kenya) and they are often poorly regulated. Given lack of government support and the low and variable pay many women often receive for their work cost and availability are significant concerns. United Nations Development Programme nationally representative surveys asked women whether childcare a constraint to achieving their livelihood ambitions. Amongst women who identified it is a constraint, cost of childcare was not a prominent issue in Senegal but it was in Kenya (38% of rural and 42% of urban women cited it), Liberia (50% of rural and 32% of urban women cited it) and Mozambique (47% of rural and 26% of urban women cited it) (for more information see box 1, p.7 in Bhatkal (2014)).

Opportunities to create the conditions to enable working mothers to access & realise the benefits of decent work in Sub-Saharan Africa

10. **Focus expansion of family leave on the informal sector:** Paid maternity leave enables mothers to recover from childbirth and care for young infants, paid paternity leave enables fathers to actively share responsibilities for physical childcare, and paid parental leave enables parents to care for children after maternity leave has ended - each without sacrificing their income and/or livelihoods, given that benefits are at a level which enables parents to maintain themselves and their children (UN Women, 2019). There are examples of contributory schemes which have included informal workers particularly informal wage workers (e.g. seasonal agricultural workers), such as in South Africa, whilst non-contributory schemes can reach a broader range of informal workers such as the self-employed (e.g. street vendors) (UN Women, 2019). Investing in all forms of parental leave promotes the overall wellbeing of mothers, fathers and children and progresses access to decent work and conditions for all. In a region where the majority of workers are in the informal sector a focus on the informal sector benefits all, but particularly women, as they disproportionately work in the informal sector.
11. **Invest in high quality, accessible and affordable early childhood care and education:** Investment in childcare is a means of supporting work-family balance and curbing gender inequality associated with women's unpaid care work (ILO, 2016). There is evidence from other low- and middle-income countries that this can have a positive impact on maternal employment (see, for example, Berlinski and Galiani (2007)'s study in Argentina). Whilst the evidence base in sub-Saharan Africa is limited, a randomised control trial study in an informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya (published in July 2019) demonstrated that providing subsidised early childcare was associated with increased maternal employment (predominately realised by married mothers) and single mothers moving to jobs with fewer and more regular hours without experiencing loss of income, thus improving their working conditions (Clark et al., 2019). Just under one fifth (19%) of the sample were recent migrants and heterogeneity analysis revealed the intervention had the same impact for them as for the whole sample, indicating its success amongst migrant as well as non-migrant mothers. In order to realise benefits, early childhood care and education needs to be adequately funded and regulated and meet the needs of working parents who may have irregular work patterns (UN Women, 2019).
12. **Support caregiving amongst men and boys to change inequitable gender norms:** Including fathers in paid family leave provision (as suggested in point 10 above) is important for enabling men's roles in childcare. However, for these to be used and successful, men and boys should be supported to actively participate in childcare thereby evolving inequitable gender norms, a challenge which is faced across world regions (Samman et al., 2016). A World Health Organisation (2007) review of programmes globally which aim to include men and boys to achieve gender equality across a range of areas (including parenthood) identified that well-designed programmes can lead to change in behaviour and attitudes.

Concluding remarks

13. *'Creating the conditions to allow the full participation of women and disabled persons in our society'* and *'driving prosperity'* require

multifaceted approaches. The evidence presented here on the specific challenges and solutions for mothers in the labour market forms one part of the puzzle. Action to promote equality in the labour market more broadly, as well as within families and communities, will support all women and disabled persons (including mothers) to fully participate in society and drive prosperity.

For further details on our research referred to see:

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