Summary of the side event of the 59th session of the Commission for Social Development: "Digital Technologies and Families: Focus on Work-Family Balance"

There are alternative views on work-family balance. The dominant perspective emphasizes that there is a clear interference of work over family implying that work engagement is bound to negatively impact family. A more recent perspective of enrichment notes that it's possible for working parents to engage in multiple roles. The current perspective assumes that what matters is to be able to fulfill both work and family related responsibilities. There are cultural variations on the three perspectives with an underlying notion that work, and family are complementary and beneficial spheres of life. The solutions sought are to exploit leverage points, align private and public priorities and eliminate impediments. Focus on childcare provision is essential in any work-family balance considerations. In line with the 'make time' hypothesis, solutions are to focus on flexible working arrangements; making the arrangements more efficient and helping parents to manage time efficiently. Complementary specialization within family where individuals pursue their activities in line with family priorities/preferences implies that balance is a family rather than individual issue. From that point of view building supports for mitigating strains is essential. It's important to focus on specific aspects of well-being (cognitive, physical, relational, emotional, spiritual). Technology can help achieve work-family balance, but it may also result in more isolation as working remotely during COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated. Work-family balance facilitates enhancements to well-being and population health, but the linkage depends on cultural views of balance and which specific domain of well-being we are trying to address. Depending on how you define work-family balance around the world it may be necessary to select different tools to bring the actual balance about. Clearly information technology can assist with that pursuit, but it can also create impediments so it's imperative to watch out for unintended consequences of technology use in the context of work-family balance.

Importantly, work-family balance notions changed and will continue to change over time. Gender role changes and women's entry in the job market impacted it profoundly. Women continue to carry the brunt of dual work-caregiving for children and older persons without pay equity. Our assumptions need to be cautioned by limits on research and have an audience focus as well as cultural context focus on perceptions of balance. We need to be cognizant of the fact that using information and communication technologies in personal, family and work domains and to balance across spheres as the internet, mobile devices and shared applications erodes boundaries of space/place and time. There are shifting economies and employment opportunities and shifting expectations from employers and from workers about how and where and when work gets done.

Early research on technology use and work-family balance identified both positive and negative consequences. Among its positive consequences is greater flexibility and autonomy by employee to determine when, where and how work gets done; the fulfillment of role obligations (e.g., caring for a sick child, completing a sale) and the possibility of yielding more/steady income for the family combined with the satisfaction to continue fulfilling roles both at work and at home. Among technology's negative consequences are excessive employer demands on access and use of technology; possible work overload with loss of time and space boundaries; intrusions on family life and on childrearing and negative impacts on mental health, family satisfaction, couple satisfaction, attrition and job turnover as well as child development.

However, we are in the early stages of research on the impacts of technologies on individuals and families. There are very rapid changes in technology, tech format, tech availability and tech use and wide global variation in technology access. There is also wide variation in technology use for families, individuals and the workplace. Moreover, we observe, dissimilarities regarding technology access, use, comfort and skill; dissimilarities in how devices and the internet are deployed as individuals, as a family and for work. Additionally, the types of employment, employment conditions, use of technology in those jobs, varies widely. Importantly, internet access and use vary around the world. Although approximately 77 per cent have internet access, this ranges from developed economies (e.g., US, EU) 98 per cent to less developed economies (e.g., Africa, India), 13 per cent.

The question arises if we are ready for "new ways of working"? To answer that question, we need to look at the shifting conditions, such as flexibility: control over where and when responsibilities are completed; permeability: responsibilities fulfilled in non-traditional places and times where workers are establishing where and when work is done. There is a clear preference for autonomy in fulfilling work and family demands as well as expressed comfort with mobile technology and cloud-based systems, especially by Millennials. Probable consequences of the use of technology for work are the fact that workers are becoming trapped in a 24/7 cycle where they have to be available for work demands outside of traditional working hours. There are also challenges to attention and focus with the use of mobile phones and its numerous applications sending notifications demanding our attention. All this exposes the extra demands in role fulfillment when boundaries are eroded with COVID-19 serving as a as a natural experiment in the use of technology. In this context, there has been a call for 'digital cultural capital' which can be defined as "awareness, motivation and skill to perform technology boundary management".

It is indispensable to expand research to represent the wide range of family and work configurations, and technology integration for work-family balance. It is also essential to pay attention to shifting needs of women in the work force. While we need to continue existing supports, we may want to put greater emphasis on culture, employment types, including those jobs that are more permeable due to the 'gig' economy' into consideration. Attention should be shifted to individual and family outcomes from technology-integrated work-life balance must be elevated on par with those directed at workplace well-being.

We need to keep in mind that as technology innovates, we should not forget privacy and safety and what it's going to mean for families. As technology will continue to change we need to embrace the idea of digital cultural capital as a new 'life skill' to be taught and foster personal responsibility to avoid negative spillover in setting spatial and time boundaries for communication, how to use the smartphone properly, deploy privacy management tools, practice good digital citizenship and online self-presentation. Investments should be made in tailored educational supports on how to manage ICT to support work and family goals as a new employee benefit. Employees can be coached on setting boundaries to lower personal stress and enrich family satisfaction and well- being and employers should be helped to learn how to create individualized work arrangements. Constructing individualized work schedule and workplace flexibility that mesh with employee perception of balance and preference is needed. Attention should also be paid to marginalized families experiencing added stressors.

Major recommendations:

1.Expand research to represent the range of family and work configurations, and technology integration for work-family balance.

2. Continue existing work-family supports capitalizing on and including technology

3. Foster healthy and effective workplace cultures for technology use

4. Keep family impacts in mind as workplace technology innovates

5. Promote healthy individualized work capacity