

Child Support Policies Around the World: Challenges and Implications for Policymakers and Development Practitioners

Single-mother families are prevalent and growing in number worldwide. In many countries, a high proportion of single-mother families experience poverty and material hardship. Child support from a non-resident father can improve these families' economic well-being. Yet, we know little about child support policy, especially in middle- and low-income countries. Data analysis and a systematic review of the literature show unique and shared challenges across 67 countries. The research also showcases various policies that may make child support more effective.

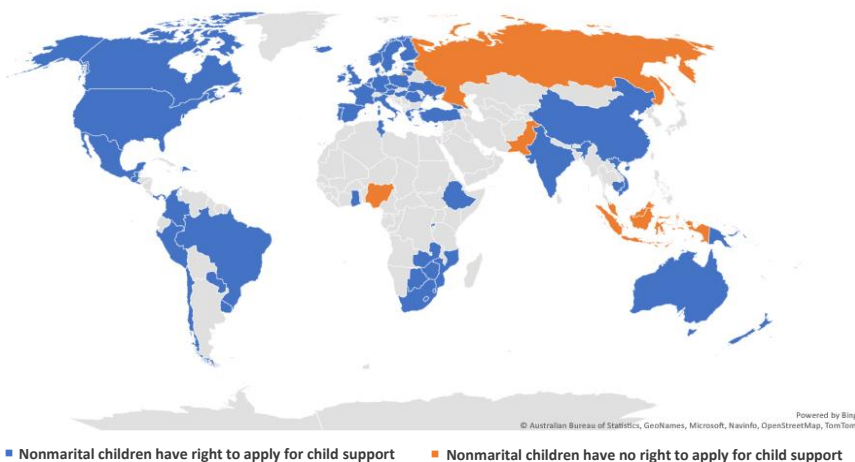
This note is based on two studies on child support policies in high-, middle- and low-income countries recently published.

Latest Evidence In Child Support Policy

A significant and growing proportion of children worldwide live in single-parent—often single-mother—families, but children in Latin American countries are far more likely to live in lone-mother families than children in other regions. In most countries, single-mother families are more likely to experience poverty than two-parent families, making child support payments from non-resident parents a potentially critical source of income. Yet, little is known about child support policies, especially in middle- and low-income countries. The [Latin America and the Caribbean Gender Innovation Lab](#) hosted a [webinar](#) with Assistant Professor Laura Cuesta from Rutgers University on *How Child Support Policy Can Help Alleviate Poverty*. Additionally, Laura Cuesta and her collaborators recently published two studies in [The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences](#) and the [Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy](#), that examined how 67 countries across the income spectrum approach whether non-resident parents should provide child support, how much is expected, and whether child support is paid. These studies included findings from 11 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In most countries examined, non-resident parents are expected to provide child support. **Some exceptions include middle- and low-income countries where children born outside marriage have either different rights or no right to child support and countries where rules for child support differ between boys and girls.** Additionally, some middle- and low-income countries recognize more than one legal system, further complicating the implementation of child support policies. However, even in high-income countries, child support policies designed for “simple cases” (i.e., divorced parents with adequate and stable resources and no other partners)

Findings of nonmarital children's right to apply for child support across 65 countries*



* Countries in grey are those with no results in the systematic review conducted by Cuesta et al. (2023) & Hakovirta et al. (2022)

may not adequately account for the realities of contemporary families, including cohabitation, multiple-partner fertility, and joint custody/shared care arrangements.

In both high-income and middle- and low-income countries, the growing instability and precariousness of the labor market affect non-resident parents' ability to pay child support. This contributes to a relatively low proportion of single-mother families receiving child support from the non-resident father, and single-mother families, especially in middle- and low-income countries, receive only modest amounts of child support. Among countries in Latin America and the Caribbean with child support data, the proportion of single-mother families receiving child support ranges from 15% in Guatemala to approximately 50% in Chile and Uruguay. Yet, in these countries, the poorest recipients of child support, on average, receive amounts that are far higher than the average amount transferred through conditional cash transfer programs.

Steps To Improve Child Support Policies

Countries need to review their child support policies in terms of both goals and actual implementation. While there are similarities in the policy issues faced by the countries included in these studies, differences in economic, cultural, demographic, and historical factors suggest that lessons from one country are not always transferable to another. Single-country reviews of policy approaches to child support issues will shed light on country-specific actions that may improve the effectiveness of these policies. Ideally, single-country studies should consider the perspectives of policymakers, practitioners, and scholars interested in child support issues.

Countries should have realistic expectations of resources from non-resident parents. Determining the appropriate amount of child support is particularly challenging when the non-resident parent has low or unstable earnings or the proportion of workers in the informal economy is as large as that observed in many middle- and low-income countries. Finding a balance between what is expected from non-resident parents and government benefits is vital to improving the effectiveness of child support policies.

Countries should also consider providing a public guarantee of a minimum amount of child support. In most countries examined, there are few mechanisms to ensure that the economic well-being of single-mother families is not affected by the lack of child support payment. The increasing instability and precariousness of job markets worldwide will exacerbate this issue. The characteristics of a publicly guaranteed child support program will depend on the goals of the program. Addressing the lack of payment is an important goal, but for single parents who are owed low amounts and those who do not receive consistent support, a publicly guaranteed child support program may be one key strategy to improve their economic well-being meaningfully.

This Knowledge to Action Note was written by Laura Cuesta, Assistant Professor at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, USA; Mia Hakovirta, Senior Research Fellow at the INVEST Research Flagship Center, University of Turku, Finland; Mari Haapanen, Doctoral Student at the INVEST Research Flagship Center, University of Turku, Finland; and Daniel R. Meyer, Emeritus Professor at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, USA in collaboration with Carlos Rodriguez Castelan, Manager of the LAC, Poverty, and Equity Global Practice of the World Bank; Jacobus Joost De Hoop, Team Lead of the Latin America and the Caribbean Gender Innovation Lab (LACGIL) and Kavell Gianina Joseph, Consultant in the LACGIL. The authors thank Becca Jensen Compton and Eija Lindroos for providing excellent research assistance.

The LACGIL supports impact evaluations and inferential studies to find out what works to close gender gaps in human capital, economic participation, social norms, and agency. The LACGIL works in partnership with units across the World Bank, aid agencies and donors, governments, non-governmental organizations, private sector firms, and academic researchers. The LACGIL work has been funded in part by the [World Bank Group's Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality \(UFGE\)](#), a multi-donor trust fund administered by the World Bank to advance gender equality and women's empowerment through experimentation and knowledge creation to help governments and the private sector focus policy and programs on scalable solutions with sustainable outcomes. The UFGE is supported by generous contributions from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

[Visit our LACGIL website](#)