



Women's Work

Mothers, children and the global childcare crisis

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Abstract

Women's economic empowerment is the policy issue of the moment. And rightly so – all the evidence points to continued discrimination against women in earnings, in access to job opportunities, in access to and control over resources, in representation on company boards. This not only reduces the opportunities of millions of women around the world but also costs economies billions of dollars every year.

Improving the economic opportunities open to women, and increasing their earnings, benefits women, benefits their families, and benefits whole countries. But this is just part of the story. Around the world, women report that their domestic responsibilities limit their ability to take up new opportunities, or force them into low paid or less secure jobs. Unless policy makers pay attention to childcare, the idea of economic empowerment will continue to be a hollow promise for millions of women struggling to balance the need to care for their families and the need to earn money to support them.

The global care crisis

There are 671 million children under five in the world today.¹ Given labour force participation rates that exceed 60% globally, a large number of these children need some sort of non-parental care. We know very little about what is happening to most of these children, but the evidence points to a crisis of care – one that is heavily concentrated among the poorest children with the most restricted access to early childhood support.

It is a crisis which affects children, who suffer inadequate and sometimes dangerous care, which affects mothers, who work long hours both inside and outside the home, which affects sisters, who are required to fill the gap and look after their siblings often at the cost of their own schooling, and which affects grandmothers, many of whom take on caring responsibilities at the cost of their own health and economic opportunity.

- At least 35.5 million children under the age of five are being left alone, or with other young children, to look after themselves. The poorest children in the poorest countries are most likely to be left alone.
- Across 66 countries representing two-thirds of the global population, on average, women spend 3.3 times as much as men do on unpaid care. In countries where the care load is heavy and most unequal, this unpaid work equals an extra 10 weeks or more each year of a woman's life. When paid and unpaid responsibilities are combined, women still do overwhelmingly more work, spending up to an extra 5 or more weeks per year.
- In parts of Ethiopia 52% of rural girls between five and eight years old are engaged in care work compared to 38% of rural boys – and one-quarter of these young girls spend three or more hours daily on unpaid care.
- In Asian countries up to half of grandparents are living with one or more grandchildren, and many are the sole carers when parents migrate for work. When asked what they would do if they had one more day in the week, grandmothers in Vietnam caring for their grandchildren said they would use the time either to earn more money, or 'just lying down and resting'.

Governments worldwide are struggling to tackle this crisis. In India, for example, less than 1% of women receive paid maternity leave. Sometimes, well-meant policy initiatives can even make things worse: when cash transfers have conditions attached, for which women are

responsible, or when public works programmes fail to recognise women as carers, they can increase the pressures on women and the impact on children's lives. Solving this crisis and making a reality of women's economic empowerment, means new ideas, new resources, and new information.

What can be done?

1. Provide good quality, affordable care outside the home for parents who want it

Early childhood care and education is rising up the policy agenda in many countries. Recent experiences, including in poor countries, show that with different stakeholders involved, it is possible to pay for and provide care that meets both women and children's needs. Each government, NGO or employer will find a different way – the critical change, for women's economic empowerment to be made real, is for childcare to be seen as an essential part of the public service infrastructure, like health or education services. As well as making life more manageable for working women, and safer for children, investments in care can create jobs, mainly for women.

- In *Mexico*, the Estancias programme, run by the Mexican government and four UN agencies, provides childcare for a minimum of eight hours a day, five days a week, with good staff ratios, nutritious food and an education programme. Up to 90% of the cost is covered by the programme, meaning that most children who attend are from the poorest families. Women sending their children to the centres have increased their daily hours of work by an average of six hours. The programme also provides employment for up to 40,000 women.
- In *India*, NGOs like SEWA and Mobile Crèches, provide care for children whose mothers are working. The Mobile Crèches have cared for over a million children in the last 50 years, funded by the NGO and by employers, and providing food, education and care so children are safe and women can work.
- In *South Africa*, the government has invested in care through the Expanded Public Works Programme, providing training and opportunities for mainly women to care for children at home or in schools. This has provided employment for over 20,000 women and provided care and support for over 185,000 children.

1 This briefing is substantially based on 'Women's Work: mothers, children and the global childcare crisis', Samman, E., Presler-Marshall, E., Jones, N., with Bhatkal, T., Melamed, C., Stavropoulou, M., and Wallace, J., ODI, March 2016. All data and examples are from this report. <http://www.odi.org/publications/10349-women%E2%80%99s-work-mothers-children-and-global-childcare-crisis> We are grateful to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for funding this report. The findings and conclusions do not necessarily reflect the funder's views.

2. Provide economic support to carers

Economic empowerment is partly about ensuring that women have the opportunities to earn their own money. But it is also about providing economic independence for those who can't work, and this includes women whose caring responsibilities prevent them from working outside the home. Social protection schemes aimed at supporting whole families, and that are adaptable to different family structures and needs, can help to support those whose caring responsibilities impose a further barrier to earning an income outside the home.

- In *South Africa* the Care Dependency Grant provides a monthly stipend to the caregivers of children with disabilities, while the means-tested Older Persons Grant recognizes the vital role of grandparents as primary care givers.

3. Make the working environment more favourable to parents

Balancing caring and earning is not just about having a place for children to go when parents are at work. It is also about organising work so that it allows parents to care for their children as they want to. For workers in the formal sector (a minority in many of the poorest countries) regulations on maternity and paternity leave, on part time working and on working hours can help employees navigate work and family life.

- In *Vietnam* new mothers in the formal sector are entitled to 6 months of maternity leave at 100% of pay, and an hour a day of paid breastfeeding breaks until their child is one.

Extending this to the informal sector, where most of the poorest women in the world are working, is more difficult, but some initiatives suggest ways to reduce the pressures on women employed in the informal sector.

- NGOs in *India* and *Bangladesh* offer women the option of insurance to cover the healthcare costs of new motherhood, which could be extended to include paid time off after birth for women in the informal sector.
- Also in *India*, a cash transfer scheme is being trialled which offers women a lump sum to offset wage loss after childbirth and allow them to rest.

4. Policy processes that take care into account

Making policy that recognises the reality of the need to care for families as well as support them economically will involve a wholesale change in approach to designing, implementing and evaluating what governments, companies and other institutions do.

A first priority is better data – to understand better the circumstances of the millions of children whose parents are in employment, and how caregivers are coping with the joint demands of care and of employment. More data on how people are spending their time will shed a light on the daily challenges of balancing different responsibilities, on the real workloads of men and women, and on the effectiveness of different policies and programmes in helping people to manage these.

With better data, governments will be better able to make appropriate budget commitments to childcare provision, to targeted social protection programmes, and to service delivery that takes childcare into account. Ongoing monitoring is needed to ensure that resources are allocated and spent in ways that take account of the pressures in trying to balance paid work and care work. Central to all of this is continued pressure on governments from women's groups and others to ensure that commitments are made and kept, and support from within governments for policies that make women's lives easier.

At its heart, this agenda is about time. Recognising that time is finite, and must be used carefully and well to both provide for the family and care for it, will be the beginning of an agenda on women's economic empowerment that is good for women, good for families, good for economies, and good for whole countries.



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