

Proper childcare helps poor working women – and it can boost economies ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the fight for the rights of working women we must not overlook the most vulnerable: the **millions of poor working women** ^[3] in cities in developing countries who are forced to take their kids with them to work or miss out on better-paid opportunities because they are caring for young children.

Some women take up work out of their homes – from stitching clothes to making snacks to sell at a market – to take care of their children. The earnings may be lower than in formal employment, but they have no other option as both decent work opportunities and quality child care services are rare in poor urban areas.

Across 31 developing countries, **less than 1 per cent** ^[4] of women living in poverty have access to a child care service, which is a shocking statistic just one month after the world marked International Women's Day.

Low-cost and unregulated childcare services may exist, but they are often still too expensive for women informal workers. Public childcare services may not be available in informal settlements or poor urban areas. City plans don't set aside enough designated spaces for childcare centres either near workers' homes or their places of work.

Ultimately, women informal workers earn even less when they have young children in their care. A new report by UN Women has found that, across 89 countries, women are 22 per cent more likely than men to **live in extreme poverty** ^[5] during their prime reproductive years (ages 25-34). Women are also less likely to receive a pension or will have lower benefit levels than men.

A coherent policy response

Adequate and quality childcare is not just a critical need for the children involved. It also determines women's participation in the labour force and the type of work they can take on.

A coherent policy response is needed to bring together women informal workers and their organisations with municipal authorities, urban planners, early childhood development experts and relevant national ministries. There is no doubt that quality public childcare services are expensive to set up and run. Yet the returns on investment are great.

In South Africa, for instance, UN Women estimates that a gross annual investment of 3.2 per cent of Gross Domestic Product into childcare services would extend universal coverage to all 0-5-year olds. It would also create 2.3 million new jobs and raise female employment rates by 10 per cent. These new jobs would generate new tax and social security revenue of up to US\$3.804 billion. These gains offset some of the costs to the state and can reduce inequalities brought on by spatial, class, gender and racial or ethnic segregation.

Women are now calling for change. Informal workers organisations in collaboration with trade unions representing formal sector workers are organising a global campaign for quality public childcare services.

Home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors, market traders and waste pickers are engaging municipalities and governments from Lima to Bangkok, calling attention to their childcare needs. They are also organising to find their own solutions when the state does not listen.

In India, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union representing close to 2 million women informal workers, runs a childcare cooperative for its members in Ahmadabad. The Market Traders Association in Accra, Ghana manage a childcare centre in a major market for traders, street vendors and others who have to bring their children to work.

“Without day care, I can't work”

However, all of these childcare services also require government support to be sustainable and remain accessible to the working poor.

We conducted a study on these issues for Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organising (WIEGO), a global research-policy-action network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor in the informal economy.

One Brazilian waste picker said: “Without day care, I can't work. When there is no day care, I don't work.”

Some childcare centres in poorer areas may be affordable but manage this only by not employing enough staff. A street vendor from South Africa told us: “The caregiver had too many children to look after...I used to receive calls notifying me that my child is sitting alone outside our home. The child had left the care facility without the caregiver's awareness.”

Of course, the provision of quality public childcare services is no silver bullet. But it is urgently needed: a **quarter of the world's urban population** ^[6] – close to one billion people – live in slums today without access to basic services and social security.

The number of urban dwellers is expected to double in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa over the next two decades; more and more people will seek homes in slums and informal settlements. Quality public childcare services guarantee a better and healthier future for children in these areas and elsewhere, and the many women who work and care for them.

One street trader we interviewed in Accra, Ghana, had managed to enroll her son in pre-school while she continued to work, secure in the knowledge that he was cared for. She knew just how valuable this was, saying: “I take my child to the school to get a bright future – I don't want him to be like me.”

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gender ^[16]

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