

Evidence review of the global childcare crisis and the road for post-COVID-19 recovery and resilience ^[1]

Author: Grantham, K., Rouhani, L., Gupta, N., Melesse, M., Dhar, D., Mehta, S. K., Kingta, K. J.,

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A year into the pandemic, we are no longer just worrying about progress on women's equality coming to a standstill. We're now seeing the possibility of such progress being reversed.

The devastating impact that COVID-19 has had on women's livelihoods cannot be overstated. Globally, women tend to work in low-paying jobs and in the informal sector—precarious employment that has been upended by lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions. Adding another layer to this burden, women's unpaid care work is soaring.

The childcare crisis is at a tipping point. **Childcare must be addressed within our COVID-19 recovery plans both to advance gender equality and because it makes fiscal sense.** In addition to reducing the undue burden of care, affordable and quality childcare frees mothers up to participate in the labour force and creates decent jobs for women in the childcare sector. Fiscal space is shrinking due to COVID-19 but limiting spending on care work would be shortsighted. When more women work, economies grow. Currently, gender gaps in labour force participation in OECD countries cost the economy about 15 percent of GDP.

Yet, so far, **we have not seen the mobilisation of public, private, and foreign aid funding that is urgently needed to tackle this crisis.** This is particularly the case in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where COVID-19 fiscal stimulus and relief packages have largely failed to address unpaid care, including childcare. In Africa, for example, only 4 out of 113 gendersensitive COVID-19 response measures have tackled unpaid care.

The inequalities women face are not new. But the pandemic has exacerbated and laid them bare. **We cannot wait on gender equality—the time is now.**

The global childcare crisis—and its disproportionate impact on women—pre-dates COVID-19. In 2018, 606 million women of working age were unavailable for employment owing to childcare responsibilities, compared to just 41 million men. But the pandemic has now taken this crisis to unprecedented levels. Since the onset of COVID-19, almost 90 percent of the world's countries have closed their schools, affecting the education of 1.5 billion children and escalating the volume and intensity of childcare. And, unsurprisingly, women are taking on the brunt of this extra work: women in most countries are currently spending more than 30 hours per week on childcare, nearly the equivalent of a full-time job.

The most marginalised of women are those hardest hit by this childcare crisis. Low-income women who lack access to time-saving technology are having to dedicate much more time than their high-income counterparts to homeschooling. Worst affected by the crisis are women in the informal sector with no paid leave, social protection, or ability to work remotely; women living in rural areas with limited access to time- and labour-saving equipment, public services, and infrastructure; women living in poverty; single mothers; essential workers; adolescent girls; and women who belong to minority racial and ethnic groups.

Simultaneously, **the female-dominated childcare sector risks collapsing.** Rising poverty levels (resulting in parents' inability to pay for childcare services), lockdowns, and fears of exposure to the virus have led to a steep drop in demand for both formal and informal childcare services. Childcare facilities are closing in droves, creating a longer-term reduction in supply of and access to quality and affordable childcare services and decreasing the number of jobs available in the childcare sector.

Childcare forms the backbone of households, economies, and societies across the globe: it boosts employment, protects family incomes, and supports economic growth. However it is woefully neglected in policymaking and is often not regarded as "real work." Women shouldn't have to make the choice between putting food on the table and providing for their families or caring for children. **And policymakers must seize the opportunity to rectify this crisis**, both as part and parcel of an inclusive COVID-19 response and for the benefit of future generations.

Currently, only 8 percent of global economic responses have addressed unpaid care, including childcare, and two-thirds of countries have

enacted no measures whatsoever. This inaction cannot continue. **We must tackle the childcare crisis from multiple angles as laid out in the ILO's "5Rs of care" framework.**

In our brief, we call for action in three key areas:

1. Unpaid care work must be recognised, reduced, and redistributed. To do so, governments must ramp up investment in gender-responsive public services: they need to provide financial assistance such as subsidies or waivers for rent and utilities, funding to offset increased operating costs and lower revenues, and direct income support to cover childcare workers' wages, especially during lockdown. They also need to support women who are managing increased care loads. Especially in LMICs, governments need to prioritise extending social assistance schemes and other forms of social protection to single-parent households, essential workers, and informal workers.
2. Paid care work must be rewarded by promoting more work for childcare workers. To do so, governments must increase public and private financing for the sector and enhance income support for both centre-based and domestic childcare workers.
3. Care workers' representation with employers and the state must be guaranteed. This can be achieved through promoting dialogue with childcare workers and strengthening their rights to collective action to ensure policy measures taken are contextually relevant. **Providing quality childcare isn't just a woman's responsibility—it's a societal one.** And mobilising resources toward tackling the childcare crisis as part of an inclusive, gender-responsive recovery won't just benefit women: it will allow everyone to reap the benefits of stability, prosperity, and economic growth.

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