

COVID childcare crisis reversing decades of women's economic progress – report ^[1]

Calls for recovery plans to address unequal burden of looking after children to advance equality and 'because it makes fiscal sense'

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EXCERPTS

The childcare crisis is at a “tipping point”, threatening to reverse decades of women’s economic progress, according to a new report published on Monday.

The report warned that the female-dominated childcare sector risked collapse, as coronavirus lockdowns and rising poverty levels had led to a “steep drop” in demand for formal and informal services.

Balancing paid and unpaid care was particularly hard for poorer women working in the informal sector, which offered no paid leave, social protection, or the chance to work remotely, said the report, published by the International Development Research Centre, the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women East Africa initiative, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, FemDev and the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy.

The Covid pandemic had exposed the extent to which childcare falls on women, who are on average now spending more than 30 hours a week looking after children, it said.

“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,” it said.

“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.”

Anita Zaidi, president of the Gates foundation’s gender equality division, said poverty levels among women had been expected to drop by 2.7% between 2019 and 2021. “But actually now it looks like poverty for women will go up by 9%. That’s almost 50 million more women globally in poverty,” she said.

The closure of childcare centres could be devastating. “Women who want to come back into the labour force cannot, because those childcare centres don’t exist. Many women have to go to work, otherwise they have nothing to eat and they don’t have shelter, so what they are then doing out of desperation is their older girls are not going back to school and have to look after the younger kids so mum can work,” she said.

Childcare provider Kidogo estimates that about 60% of families in Kenya who were previously using its centres have shifted care responsibility to girls as young as eight.

Zaidi said childcare should be subsidised and needed to be regarded as a societal issue, not a problem for women to solve. “Childcare is a critical barrier to women’s labour force participation and with women not participating in the labour force economies will not progress,” she said.

Last week, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) called for the “immediate introduction” of a temporary basic income to ensure women who face the harshest economic impacts of Covid-19 are able to survive the pandemic. A monthly investment of between 0.07% and 0.31% of developing countries’ GDP could lessen the impact of the pandemic for up to 2 billion women, it said.

Related link: Evidence review of the global childcare crisis and the road for post-COVID-19 recovery and resilience ^[3]

Region: International ^[4]

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