

Childcare challenge^[1]

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Source: Dawn

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Apr 2024

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

Excerpts

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In her inaugural speech as Punjab Chief Minister, Maryam Nawaz pledged to develop day care centres in workplaces to enable working women. This comes on the back of a spree of day care centre launches in Punjab in recent years, including at police stations. Last year, the then president signed the Day Care Centres Bill, which requires workplaces in Islamabad with more than 70 employees to establish crèches. It has also made news headlines each time a provincial assembly has established a childcare facility, setting a positive precedent.

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Despite this alarming statistic, the impetus to push for adequate childcare for Pakistani women seems more like lip service than a top priority. This highlights the state's short-sightedness, given that female workforce participation is constantly cited as a golden key to unlock Pakistan's economic potential. Indeed, a 2018 IMF study concluded that Pakistan could boost its GDP by 30pc if it closed the gender gap in its workforce.

Childcare demand is set to grow exponentially.

There are various barriers to additional childcare provision, the key one being the failure to recognise the massive demand for such support. The nostalgic fantasy of joint families, where infants are left in the care of doting grandmothers, persists. In reality, care is provided by elder female siblings or cousins, themselves denied schooling because of childcare obligations, fuelling a vicious cycle of female poverty and marginalisation. Or it's a maid — likely underage and underpaid — who herself will struggle with childcare when the time comes to start a family. Improving formal childcare provision for one woman would likely improve the lot of many others.

The childcare demand is set to grow exponentially. High inflation means dual-income households, particularly in urban areas, will grow in number. Some of this will hopefully also be spurred by positive pull factors, as more workplaces seek to be gender inclusive.

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Related link: Investments in childcare for gender equality in Asia and the Pacific^[3]

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