

EVIDENCE REVIEW OF THE GLOBAL CHILDCARE CRISIS AND THE ROAD FOR POST-COVID-19 RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

POLICY SUMMARY



Recovering from COVID-19: The case for investing in childcare

With recurring shutdowns of schools and childcare centres, households around the world have seen a huge rise in the childcare burden, largely falling to women and girls. How can we rebuild our economies in ways that don't leave them behind?

In 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that the global pandemic “could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women’s rights” over the past 25 years. Even before the onset of COVID-19, the International Labour Organization (ILO) had warned of a severe “care crisis,” with some 1.9 billion children under the age of 15—including 800 million children under six—in need of care.

Childcare must be addressed within 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 labor force and creates jobs for women in the childcare sector.

A recent review of evidence points to ways the pandemic has deepened the childcare crisis and widened gender gaps. It highlights the steep cost of inaction, with a focus on low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), and offers solutions for governments, donors, and employers.

COVID-19 has significantly increased women’s time on childcare

An Ipsos poll in 16 countries in October 2020 found that women’s time spent on childcare jumped from 26 to 31 hours per week—a 19% increase.

Cover Images:

(Top): Nabukenya Mary 25 (R), weaves with her children and friends Sumayia (L) and Doreeka (C) in Kampala, Uganda, on February 18, 2021.

Photo credit: Sumy Sadurni

(Below left): Sangam Devi (L), feeds her children, Ishika 3 (C), and Aarush 5 (R) in New Delhi, India on February 23, 2021.

Photo credit: Mansi Midha

(Below right): Elda Sidlabane 66 (L), helps Yamihla Lambatha 6 (R) with her school work in Cape Town, South Africa on February 18, 2021.

Photo credit: Sam Reinders

The cost of inaction: reversing progress on women’s gains

The effects of COVID-19 on women’s economic empowerment can be seen through four key pathways:

- the disruption of education and early learning;
- the existential threat to the childcare sector;
- increased household care burdens; and
- the loss of employment and income.

UNESCO estimates that 1.5 billion school-aged children globally have been affected by COVID-19 related school closures. At the same time, the childcare sector is under strain as distancing and hygiene requirements and the need for personal protective equipment have increased childcare operations costs while demand has fallen due to lockdowns and fears of infection. While both women and men are spending more time on childcare, the bulk of the extra time is falling to women and adolescent girls, deepening pre-existing gender norms. School closures are also widening gender gaps in education access, as more girls are losing study time to care for siblings. Many may not return to school post-COVID-19 due to rising poverty levels, early entry into the labour force, or early marriage and pregnancy, as was seen after the Ebola epidemic.

COVID-19 has also led to more employment loss for women than men. ILO labour force surveys show a significant decline in employment in the second quarter of 2020 compared with the previous year—with a steeper decline for women than men in most countries. This decline can be attributed to more women leaving employment to care for children and women being more likely to work in retail and food services. >

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› The childcare sector, including centres and domestic workers in private homes, is largely female and those still employed are working longer hours and are more vulnerable to abuse by employers.

Overall, those hardest hit by the pandemic are informal workers—predominantly female—whose work was already less secure and who have few benefits and protections to buffer their loss of income.

Yet, Amnesty International notes that childcare and unpaid care work remain absent from the stimulus packages and emergency measures being announced. In fact, new analysis by Oxfam (2020) finds that 84% of the International Monetary Fund’s COVID-19 loans encourage, and in some cases require, poor countries to adopt tougher austerity measures which could disproportionately disadvantage the poor and women, whose unpaid care work must compensate for the shortfall in access to social services.

What can be done?

The solutions presented here are informed by the ILO’s “5Rs of care”: recognise, reduce,

and redistribute unpaid care work and increase the rewards and representation of paid care workers. While many of these recommendations are not new, they are more important than ever as economies recover from the pandemic.

1. STEPS TO RECOGNISE, REDUCE, AND REDISTRIBUTE UNPAID CARE WORK

■ Invest in gender-responsive public services

Families spend less time caring for children when they have access to, and can afford, public services such as piped water, sanitation, electricity, and transport. During COVID-19, longstanding calls for investment in these services have become even more urgent.

Examples:

- In West Africa, several governments have either subsidised or fully covered the cost of electricity and water bills for vulnerable and low-income households.
- Argentina, Bolivia, El Salvador, and Venezuela have prohibited basic services from being cut-off for non-payment. ›

Recommendations to address the COVID-19 exacerbated childcare crisis

Recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work		Reward paid care work by promoting more decent work for care workers	Guarantee care workers’ representation with employers and the state		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in gender-responsive public services • Reopen schools and childcare facilities safely • Increase childcare support for households • Shift social norms around childcare • Introduce or expand family and health-related leave policies • Increase employer adoption of family friendly workplace arrangements and policies • Collect more and better data on childcare 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve public and private financing for the childcare sector • Improve support to centre-based childcare workers • Improve support to domestic workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote social dialogue with children workers • Strengthen the right to collective action and bargaining in the childcare sector 		
Care policies	Macroeconomic policies	Social protection policies	Labour policies	Migration policies	

Based on the ILO’s “5Rs of care” framework (ILO, 2018)

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➤ ■ Safely reopen schools and childcare centres

Measures such as reducing class sizes and ventilating classrooms are helping these facilities reopen but come at a cost, underscoring the need for innovative and cost-effective approaches that work in LMIC contexts.

Examples:

- Afghanistan, Brazil, Liberia, the Philippines, and Senegal have simplified school curricula and shortened vacation periods for continuous learning.
- LMICs in Asia, Africa, and the Americas have adopted SMS, phone calls, and other low-technology methods to help parents supervise their children's remote learning.

■ Help families cope with the increased burden of care

Financial assistance—to compensate for lost earnings or pay for alternative care arrangements—along with flexible working conditions and generous leave arrangements can better equip families to juggle childcare and employment. Governments and employers both have a role in creating a more gender-neutral sharing of unpaid care within families. Currently, most of these measures benefit only those in formal full-time work. Creative new measures are needed to protect self-employed, part-time, or informal workers.

Examples:

- Beneficiaries of Ethiopia's Urban Productive Safety Net Project—mostly female heads of households—receive an advance payment while on leave from their public works jobs.
- Montenegro, Latvia, Cuba, and Germany have introduced wage subsidies to cover the salaries of parents or those caring for ill family members.

■ Help shift social norms around childcare

One positive finding is that men are spending more time caring for children during the pandemic, even if less so than women. Sustaining this trend will require leadership across governments, employers, and communities. Governments can help by enacting laws and policies that encourage and normalize women's labour force participation, such as equal pay legislation.

Example:

- Gender transformative workshops, media campaigns, and school-based curricula have shown to increase the involvement of men and boys in unpaid care work.

2. STEPS TO REWARD CHILDCARE WORKERS AND INCREASE THEIR REPRESENTATION

■ Improve public and private financing for the childcare sector

Recent studies in Canada, South Africa, Turkey, and Uruguay show that universal childcare can be a cost-effective way to ensure both men and women thrive in the workforce. Research in several LMICs has found that quality and accessible childcare has positive effects on maternal employment. Non-governmental and public-private partnership models of childcare can also improve women's labour force participation. Governments can help childcare centres weather the pandemic through subsidies or waivers to offset increased operating costs and lost revenues and to cover workers' wages.

Examples:

- In a low-income area of Nairobi, Kenya, one study found that mothers given daycare vouchers were 17% more likely to be employed and gained 24% in income.
- South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme provides care for 185,000 children while employing 20,000 women as childcare providers. ➤

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► ■ Improve support to childcare workers

Domestic and centre-based workers need financial support to offset lost income during COVID-19. Governments can provide food programs, healthcare coverage, personal protective equipment, and exemptions from lockdown restrictions to allow for travel to and from work without penalty. Domestic workers—many of whom are migrants—face greater challenges in accessing assistance and are more vulnerable to abuse of their rights.

Specific measures include the provision of standalone support for childcare through targeted programming and initiatives, as well as investments in the childcare sector and in gender-responsive public services and infrastructure. It also includes integrated “care analysis” of the impact of fiscal stimulus packages provided to countries to ensure this support is having its intended effect, and not simply reinforcing women’s and girls’ unequal responsibility for care. This analysis is currently lacking.

Examples:

- Portugal has granted all migrants and asylum seekers, including migrant domestic workers, temporary citizenship rights during COVID-19.
- In India, there has been a push to increase the pay of rural Anganwadi childcare workers and to extend social protections to cover them.

■ Include childcare workers in COVID-19 response decision-making

Working directly with unions, associations, groups, and workers themselves—is the only way to tailor measures that appropriately support and protect childcare workers.

Example:

- In Ecuador, domestic worker unions worked alongside the Ministry of Labour, the National Council for Gender Equality, the ILO, and UN Women to create a cell phone app that informs workers about their rights.

■ Strengthen their right to collective action

Most care workers in LMICs are informal, with little ability to organize and bargain with employers. Formalization is one path to strengthening collective action, but it must be accompanied by channels that allow childcare workers to report and seek remedies for violations of their rights.

Example:

- The Jamaican government is working with the ILO to increase formal employment in domestic work.

MOVING FORWARD: BUILDING CHILDCARE INTO OUR COVID RECOVERY

As countries move out of the response phase, they face tough choices in dealing with the costs of recovery. Imposing austerity measures to reduce debt is one obvious temptation, but it would come at an enormous cost to the health, education, and childcare systems that have proven vital to our resilience—and to progress on gender equality. Investing in childcare—and care more broadly—will facilitate a more inclusive recovery. Such investment can have a direct impact by boosting employment and job retention in the care sector, while also alleviating care constraints that keep women from work. It will require mobilizing public and private resources, and, in LMICs, foreign aid:

- Governments must look to innovative sources of funding, such as new forms of taxation, and new joint programming with NGOs and private sector partners. The private sector must enact family-friendly workplace policies and arrangements to support employees’ childcare needs.
- Donor organizations and international financial institutions must ensure that childcare is addressed holistically in all COVID-19 fiscal stimulus and relief packages to LMICs. ●

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