

**BUILDING BACK TOGETHER:**  
**CHILDCARE AN IMPORTANT STEP ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY FOR WOMEN  
WORKERS**  
**POLICY BRIEF**

**INTRODUCTION**

On September 15, 2021, the *Campaign for Quality Child Care for all Workers (India)* organized a webinar to highlight the critical importance of childcare for the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and for enabling women workers to re-enter the workforce.<sup>1</sup> This note presents the evidence on childcare and what it enables, the consequences of lack of childcare, and recommendations on the action that needs to be taken to improve and strengthen childcare provision in India. The focus is primarily on childcare for low-income women workers in the informal economy.

Informal workers, who are over 90% of the workforce, live and work in vulnerable conditions and lack social protection, good health care and access to sanitation infrastructure and decent work. These vulnerabilities have all been exacerbated due to the pandemic. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic is a *triple crisis*. At its origin it is a public *health crisis*; lockdowns, and social distancing have led to an inevitable *economic crisis*. With the closing of creches, anganwadis and schools, there is *care crisis*. The triple crisis has multiple impacts which will be felt for a long time, and across many generations of informal women workers' and their children.

The COVID-19 crisis has had a disproportionate gendered impact on the livelihoods of informal economy workers and has increased the care burden of these workers.

**THE EVIDENCE**

**Positive Impact of childcare**

Internal studies conducted before the pandemic by SEWA's Sangini Childcare Cooperative show that women's income more than doubles when full day childcare is available. In addition to the increase in income, several studies conducted before the pandemic showed that the impact of childcare included older siblings going to school and reduced malnutrition

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<sup>1</sup> Panelists at the webinar included, [Kanika Jha Kingra](#), Senior Policy and Advocacy Manager at Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE), [Monika Banerjee](#), research fellow, Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), [Sumitra Mishra](#), Executive Director Mobile Creches, [Aline Souza](#), Waste picker, (MNCR-National Movement of Recyclable Material Collectors), Brazil, [Annie Diouf](#), Street vendor, (CNTS-National Confederation of Workers in Senegal), Senegal, [Parveen Bano](#), Home-based worker, Sangini Childcare Cooperative, SEWA, Ahmedabad, [Amanda Devercelli](#), Global Lead for Early Childhood Development, World Bank, [Marieke Koning](#), Policy adviser, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) [Mirai Chatterjee](#), Director Social Security, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Chair WIEGO Board. The webinar was moderated by [Shalini Sinha](#), Country Representative Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), [Rachel Moussie](#), Deputy Director of Social Protection, WIEGO and [Susan Thomas](#), National Health and Childcare Coordinator, SEWA.

of children in childcare centers. Childcare services also build solidarity at the local level and are an excellent way to organize women workers into collectives as it addresses a crucial need for women workers.

Just before the pandemic occurred, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) published several pieces of research that indicated that investment in care is far more effective in recovering from crisis or recession than austerity policies. Investment in care can create millions of jobs in the economy.

The positive impact of childcare centers was also seen during the current pandemic. SEWA found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the childcare centers became a hub for all kinds of support because of the solidarity that they create in the community. The centers were not just a source of relief to the families but also helped with counselling and mental health support. Similarly, a study conducted by Mobile Creches between May and September 2020, saw that as soon as the lockdown hit, the dry nutrition service distribution system improved significantly from 20% to 60%. The nutrition quantity was not adequate, and the nutrition balance was not adequate, but some nutrition was reaching the families.

The Sangini Cooperative has childcare centers that are based in the community and the childcare workers are women from the community. These community-based centers were an immense source of support for the families during the pandemic. When the lockdown happened, the centers were shut down but the childcare workers did not forsake the children. Through their own initiative they started distributing food and Early Childhood Learning Material to the mothers. More than that they were like a support system for the families especially for the women workers – talking to them, easing their stress, telling them that things will be alright. The childcare center is not only about providing child care but about bringing the community together, especially in a disaster situation.

### **Adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

It is widely known that the pandemic led to large scale loss of livelihoods and income. A study in Ahmedabad found that 99% of the families studied had lost their primary source of income. In 69% households, both the husband and the wife had lost their work.

The loss in livelihoods led to severe food shortages. Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE) conducted a study in 2020 in rural Odisha to look at the impact of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown on women members of Self-Help Groups. The study found that 83% of the respondents had insufficient food. Women and girls suffered the nutritional impact of this shortage much more than boys as the later were given priority in the families.

### **Adverse impact of the closure of childcare centers**

**Lower immunization:** The closure of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centers led to much lower immunization rates among young children. At normal times, immunization through the ICDS centers is about 90%. As a result of the pandemic induced lockdown, it fell to 12%. Fortunately, it picked up later even though the centers did not open.

**Increased burden of care:** The closure of childcare centers led to an increased burden of care in families. In a study conducted in Odisha in 2020 by IWWAGE, it was seen that more than 70% women reported that they spent more than six hours a day on household work. A large part of the work was focussed on childcare.

Another IWWAGE study across 4 states in India found that 33% of women who owned small and micro enterprises had shut down their enterprises once the pandemic related lockdown

happened. This was primarily due to the increased burden of unpaid care work in the home. Investing in childcare helps to build the resilience of women workers at times of crisis.

**Disproportionate burden on women workers:** The pandemic and closure of childcare centers had a disproportionate impact on women. The study at Sangini Cooperative found that even in December 2020-January 2021, when the lock down had been partially lifted, the majority of women had still not been able to get back their work. One of the primary reasons for women not being able to work was that children in the 0-6 age group were at home. Studies by the International Labour Organization show that globally women lost millions of jobs and income more than men due to the burden of unpaid care work. Similarly, a 2020 study conducted by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) which covered over 2000 informal workers in over 12 cities in Africa, Americas, Asia and Europe found that women in informal economy who had care responsibilities worked 33% fewer days than other women during the initial lockdown. After easing of restrictions in July 2020, women with care responsibilities were earning only 50% of their regular earnings compared to 70% for men.

**Mental stress:** IWWAGE found that 66% of the women in the study conducted in 2020 reported that they were highly stressed, particularly due to food insecurity, and relatedly to loss of income and livelihoods. The fact that the entire family was home all day and the women had to provide food and tea throughout the day added to their stress.

**Zero educational inputs for the pre-school children:** While there has been a flurry of online education for school-going children, and rightfully so, no attention has been given to the loss of learning for children under 6 years, which is the most critical period for child development. And little attention has been paid to the adverse impact on these children's development during the last 18 months without access to any kind of outside education.

**Risks faced by children left unattended:** As economies have begun to open up, parents have begun to return to work. However, there is no safe space to leave young children as childcare centers are mostly closed. There is enough evidence from experience on the ground to show that children are facing all kinds of abuse and risks to their safety. That is a big issue that has come up in the study conducted by Mobile Creches of childcare centers in Delhi. It was also found to be the case in a study conducted in Senegal.

**Risks faced by frontline workers:** In Delhi the highest burden of reaching services and continuation of services has been on aaganwadi workers and ASHA workers. They have had minimal social protection and minimal protection against the health disaster; yet they have tried to provide door-to-door home-based services. Globally too, we see poor working conditions of care and health workers, particularly those in the informal economy, and 70% of them are women.

**Reduced hiring of women workers by construction companies:** A study by Mobile Creches, Delhi shows that more than 60% of construction sector workers migrated back to the village during the first lockdown. Eighteen months later, 40% have returned to their worksites. But this has not meant good news for women workers and their children at construction sites. Less than half the women are coming back to construction sites because the construction industry is reluctant to employ women workers back into the industry. The lack of childcare spaces and therefore the safety of children and the reputation risk it means for the industry is another reason. This is especially true for the larger companies who can use capital to replace low skill labour with technology.

**Current childcare facilities are inadequate:** A recent paper released by the World Bank shows that 40% of children around the world below primary school age need childcare but

do not have access. These studies also found that if the access was increased, 43 million high quality jobs could be created. Similarly, a study by the International Labour Organization carried out before the pandemic found that to address this gap, there is a need to create 269 million jobs in the care economy by 2030.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

All sectors are working hard to get the economy on the road to recovery after the pandemic and lockdowns. As the evidence suggests, investment in childcare provisions is a crucial component of the multi-pronged strategy being adopted to ensure an economic recovery.

There is enough evidence to show that childcare is not just a children's issue. Quality childcare is good for children's development, and good for women's economic empowerment. It is good for families because when women earn, they use the income to invest in their families. Finally quality childcare is good for worker productivity and the overall economy. **Childcare must be framed as an issue that impacts the entire economy.**

1. Quality childcare must be recognized as a right for all workers. Full day, free, quality care, holistic and integrated early childhood care must be a universal entitlement.
2. Governments need to invest in the care economy. The ICDS is closest to rural and urban communities of women and children. ICDS has phenomenal scope to expand and reimagine itself to provide 6-8 hours of care services to children with decent budget allocation and investment in adequate staffing. Existing vacancies at childcare centers need to be filled immediately. Allocation to childcare should be 1% of Indian GDP.
3. There are sufficient legal mandates for worksite based childcare to be provided, but the implementation is poor. Factories, construction industry, tea gardens, brick kilns – the legal mandates for all these sites must get activated.
4. Childcare workers should get decent work with fair wages, satisfactory working conditions and social protection. ITUC's New Social Contract advocates for the creation of millions of decent jobs in the care sector including in child and elderly care, with decent pay and working conditions which is fundamental and very important for care workers in the informal economy.
5. Childcare must be of good quality to be effective. There is a need to promote skill development of childcare workers to train them to provide quality childcare.
6. The private sector needs to play its part in providing quality full day childcare facilities – at the worksite if necessary. There is a strong need to have childcare as a key component of the recovery efforts in partnership with the private sector.
7. Community-based childcare is extremely effective. We must recognize women within the community are the strongest touch points for these children. There is a huge potential for supporting women from within the community as care entrepreneurs. These centers should be subsidized as a business model. It helps women within the communities to provide solutions that are far more localized than any government, industry or NGOs can provide.

8. We should develop appropriate and participatory mechanisms where workers have a voice for implementation, monitoring and evaluation, including grievance redressal. Local organizations of women like cooperatives, unions and self-help groups are the best place to run these centers.
  
9. Resources for childcare can be supplemented by tapping funded programs that have a close link to childcare provision. Most of the COVID-19 recovery plans include a section on supporting small businesses and on micro loans. There is a need to target that funding – the job training programs, employment programs, small business funding can all be channelled to the childcare sector which will not only help women get employed but also help women who own small businesses. Similarly, there is a lot of funding globally related to nutrition which should be used to make sure children in childcare centers get the nutrition they need. Childcare centers should be used as a way to ensure that children get the nutrition they require, especially for the first 1000 days.
  
10. National Governments should demand resources from institutions like the World Bank. The World Bank is about to launch a major new work program across all of its different sectors and across all of its different entities. The Bank gives grants and loans to countries and some of this can be used to finance for quality and affordable childcare.
  
11. Citizen engagement, good models, good partnerships and public private partnerships are needed to demonstrate good practices in childcare provision. This in turn can be used to advocate with the government for greater investment in childcare.