



POLICY BRIEF



Photo: IDRC/Tommy Trenchard

How Mothers in Kenya Balance Paid Work and Child Care: The Case for Affordable Centre-Based Child Care.

As more women across sub-Saharan Africa engage in paid work, they face the challenge of finding suitable child care arrangements. Providing affordable centre-based child care could be a key strategy to improving the lives and welfare of women and children living in urban African slums.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Around the globe, a growing number of women are leaving agricultural work and entering the service and industry sectors, while continuing to perform the bulk of unpaid domestic work and child care within their households. These working mothers pursue a variety of strategies to meet their dual demands for providing child care and earning an income.

KEY RESULTS

- Combining work and child care is difficult, if not impossible, without compromising productivity or the safety of children.
- Relying on family members to assist with child care is not a viable or preferable option for most working mothers.
- Centre-based child care is perceived as offering key advantages to mothers and their children.
- The main barrier to centre-based child care is user costs.

Historically, young children often accompanied their mothers to work, particularly for mothers engaged in agricultural production. Alternatively, mothers may enlist the help of family members to care for young children while they work. Increasingly, however, mothers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are turning to a third option, centre-based child care.

Compared to LMICs in Latin America and Asia, little is known about the child care needs or arrangements of working mothers in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly those living in poor, informal, urban settlements (commonly referred to as slums). To better understand how mothers in African slum settlements balance paid work and child care, researchers Shelley Clark and Midanna De Almada (McGill University), Stella Muthuri and Milka Wanjohi (African Population and Health Research Centre), and Caroline Kabiru (Population Council) studied the child care arrangements of more than 1,200 employed and unemployed mothers living in a slum community in Nairobi, Kenya.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The researchers employed a mixed method approach, which draws on survey data from 1,222 mothers aged 15–49 years with at least one child aged 1–3 years and in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of 31 mothers to assess how women balance their dual roles as income earners and child care providers. Specifically, the researchers examined the drawbacks and benefits of three main strategies used by working mothers: (1) combining work and child care, (2) getting help from kin and neighbours, and (3) using centre-based child care.

For the survey portion of the research, mothers provided basic socio-demographic information about themselves and their households. They were also asked detailed questions about their income generating activities in the last month and child care arrangements. In addition, mothers provided reports about the child's overall health and incidence of specific illnesses (diarrhea, fever, cough) in the last two weeks. Children's cognitive development was also assessed. Lastly, mothers were asked about their own health and feelings of stress, depression, or anxiety. Questions asked during the in-depth interviews mirrored those in the surveys and encouraged mothers to elaborate on the strategies they employed to manage child care and work. Follow-up questions were asked to probe the particular reasons mothers pursued one strategy over another as well as the perceived advantages and disadvantages of their child care arrangements.



KEY FINDINGS

This study takes an in-depth look at the strategies mothers in poor, urban African settings use to reconcile their responsibilities of child care and paid work. The results point to several main conclusions.

Combining work and child care is difficult, if not impossible, without compromising productivity or the safety of children.

Many of the income earning activities that mothers pursue are incompatible with simultaneous child care. Some working mothers are not allowed to bring their young children to work with them, while others worry about the safety of their children in their work environments. Nearly all mothers who did supervise their children while working felt distracted and worried that they were unable to satisfactorily perform either task. Most mothers participating in the study worked in the informal sector, demonstrating that it is not only women who work in the formal sector who face child care dilemmas.

Relying on family members to assist with child care is not a viable or preferable option for most working mothers.

Contrary to popular belief, we find that less than 20% of employed mothers rely on other family members to care for their children. The process of urbanization has greatly increased the geographic distance between mothers and their extended family members. At the same time, the spread of primary and secondary education for girls and the expansion of employment options for adult women mean that the opportunity costs of providing free child care have risen considerably for older sisters, aunts, and

even younger grandmothers. Many of these economic changes are compounded by demographic shifts over the last few generations. Although fertility rates remain relatively high in most of sub-Saharan Africa, the previous decades witnessed a notable decline resulting in fewer older siblings and aunts than in previous generations. In addition, whilst fathers' direct participation may be rising in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Clark et al., 2015; Kah, 2012), it remains relatively low.

Centre-based child care is perceived as offering key advantages to mothers and their children.

Formal centre-based child care is viewed as highly desirable and beneficial even beyond its ability to increase women's labour force participation and reduce the child care burden placed on other family members. We find that over 45% of working mothers use centre-based child care and almost a quarter of unemployed mothers pay for child care services, which they perceive to be a means of promoting their children's cognitive, social and emotional development, and alleviating their own stress and anxiety about their children's welfare. Consistent with these perceptions, our survey data shows that day care use is positively associated with children's cognitive development and adolescents' school attendance.

The main barrier to centre-based child care is user costs.

The costs for such care can be quite substantial, representing about 17% of women's monthly wages, and thus prevented some mothers from using it and from engaging in paid work. Women, unlike most men, implicitly calculate their wages as their potential earnings minus the costs of child care, meaning private child care places a "wage tax" on women's income. It also disadvantages the poorest households whose child care costs comprise the largest fraction of their income (Kabeer, 2008). Mothers also expressed concerns about the quality of care provided in the centres, for instance regarding sanitation levels or the amount of food provided to children, but cost was the most prohibitive factor to use.

POLICY INSIGHTS

Greater research and policy attention is required to meet the needs of working mothers in sub-Saharan Africa. Researchers and decision-makers should consider the following:

There is strong demand for centre-based child care among mothers living in urban slum communities in Africa.

The perception that combining work and child care or relying on family members to assist with child care are viable or preferable options for African mothers are challenged by the results of this study, which demonstrate women perceive several benefits of centre-based child care for both themselves and their children. These findings suggest that there is a strong demand for centre-based child care among mothers living in urban slum communities in Africa, and that meeting this demand could be a key strategy to improving the lives and welfare of these women and their children.

Subsidizing centre-based child care can improve African women's employment outcomes.

Having to combine work and child care can jeopardize women's employment opportunities, particularly in the formal sector where it may be explicitly forbidden for children to accompany their parents to work. For mothers who missed work to take care of their children when they got sick, sometimes their employment was terminated. Women also described the difficulty of trying to find work while also caring for young children, including the belief that bringing young children when they met with prospective employers reduced their chances of securing a position. Others reported that their child care responsibilities prevented them from responding quickly to impromptu job opportunities. Publicly subsidized child care centres can eliminate child care as an obstacle for women to finding and maintaining work, and to advancing into better paying jobs in the formal sector.

More research is required to better identify the potential causal benefits of centre-based child care.

One of the most important limitations of this study is that it relies on cross-sectional data. Hence, these correlations do not demonstrate causality. For example, although we find significantly lower levels of cognitive delay among children using day care, this is not necessarily evidence that access to day care improves children's cognitive development. Rather, it may signify that mothers are more likely to use early child care and education services for their more gifted children. This is one of several important caveats which suggest that more research is required to better identify the potential causal benefits of centre-based child care.

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