



## Women's work

### *Mothers, children and the global childcare crisis*

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Executive summary  
March 2016



The world is facing a hidden crisis in childcare. That crisis is leaving millions of children without the support they need, with damaging consequences for their future. It is also having severe impacts on three generations of women – on mothers, grandmothers and daughters. There is an urgent need to solve the global care crisis to improve the lives of both women and children and to grow economies.

There are 671 million children under five in the world today.<sup>1</sup> Given labour force participation rates that exceed 60% globally, a large number of these children need some sort of non-parental care during the day. Early childhood care and education programming is not managing to match this need. At most, half of three- to five-year-old children in developing countries participate in some form of early childhood education, typically for a few hours daily.<sup>2</sup> We know very little about what is happening to the rest, but all the evidence points to a crisis of care. That crisis is heavily concentrated among the poorest children with the most restricted access to early childhood support.

## Impact on children

At its most severe this ‘crisis of care’ means that, across the world, at least 35.5 million children under the age of five are being left alone, or with other young children, without adult supervision.<sup>3</sup> That is more than all the under-fives living in Europe. Children in the poorest countries and from the poorest families are the most likely to be left alone. This can be damaging to child health and wellbeing, and is symptomatic of the difficult choices facing parents – mostly mothers – as they try to balance caring for their children with earning enough to support them. In developed countries, while older children do regularly care for themselves, only a tiny percentage of very young children do so. By and large, parents have other choices.

## Impact on women

Mothers are entering the workforce in increasing numbers, both out of choice and necessity. But this has costs. In trying to meet the twin demands of caring for their children and providing for them economically, women’s capacity is being stretched to the limit. The critical issue is time, which comes at a price – in health, in wellbeing and in money. It is a price predominantly paid by women, and the issue is common to women everywhere. Whether in Iraq or Italy, Ghana or Greece, women are spending years more than men on unpaid

care over a lifetime. And where women are in paid employment, the reduction in their unpaid care work is not commensurate.

Across 66 countries around the world representing two-thirds of the global population, there are huge inequalities in the time spent by women and men on unpaid work. On average, women spend 3.3 times as much as men do. Our analysis focuses on the extremes. In countries, where the care load is heavy and most unequal, this unpaid work occupies the equivalent of an extra 10 weeks or more each year of a woman’s life than a man’s.<sup>4</sup> The most equal country is Sweden, where inequalities associated with care see women spend 1.7 weeks more per year on unpaid care than men. When paid and unpaid responsibilities are combined, women still do overwhelmingly more work, up to five or more weeks per year more than men.<sup>5</sup> Data on the amount of time spent directly on childcare is available for fewer countries (37, covering 20% of the global population). But it again indicates that women bear the heaviest burden. On average, women typically undertake three-quarters of all childcare, with a range from between 63% (Sweden) to 93% (Ireland).

Unpaid care responsibilities cost women more than ‘just’ time – they are also reflected in lower income. When they enter the workforce, women with children earn less than they would if they did not have children. The

<sup>1</sup> UN (2015) Future of the AIDS response: building on past achievements and accelerating progress to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030 Report of the Secretary-General. New York: UN. ([http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/20150406\\_UNGA69\\_856\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/20150406_UNGA69_856_en.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> The gross enrolment rate is 49.1%. Net primary enrolment for pre-primary school is not available. World Bank (2015) World Development Indicators: Participation in education. (<http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/2.11>)

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF global databases (2014) based on DHS, MICS and other nationally representative surveys. (<http://data.unicef.org/ecd/homeenvironment.html>)

<sup>4</sup> UNDP (2015) Work for Human Development. Human Development Report 2015. New York: UNDP. Estimates are computed using updated data from Charmes (2015). For Iraq, Mexico, Costa Rica and Turkey, the difference exceeds 10 weeks.

<sup>5</sup> For Benin, the difference is 5.7 weeks per year and for Mali, it is 4.7.

‘motherhood pay penalty’, whereby mothers earn less than childless women, is evident around the world – it has been estimated at 37% in China, 42% in 31 developing countries and 21% in the UK.<sup>6</sup> In part due to women’s choices, and in part the result of employer discrimination, the pay gap also reflects the absence of accessible childcare.

Gender pay discrimination distorts labour market incentives, diminishes purchasing power and leads to lower revenue. Women’s lower earnings are also likely to exacerbate childcare deficits in making it necessary for mothers to spend more time working to provide for their children. Overall financial costs are staggering the cost of unpaid care has been valued recently at up to \$10 trillion annually, around 13% of world GDP.<sup>7</sup> As it has been estimated that between now and 2025, gender parity could boost global GDP by up to \$28 trillion,<sup>8</sup> these foregone earnings represent an enormous cost.

It is not just mothers bearing this cost. This unpaid care is also borne by adolescent and even younger girls, passing on the costs to the next generation in the form of lost chances for schooling. Evidence from parts of Ethiopia, for

example, suggests that 52% of rural girls between five and eight years old are engaged in care work compared to 38% of rural boys – and that one-quarter (26%) of these girls spend three or more hours daily on unpaid care. Our case study, also focused on Ethiopia, describes how adolescent girls – who migrate to provide childcare in urban areas – are plugging childcare gaps, and how the government’s ambitious efforts to extend pre-primary education to all children over the coming decades is currently relying largely on untrained and poorly compensated adolescents and young adults.

Care responsibilities are also taking a toll on both the health and incomes of the millions of grandmothers worldwide who are providing exclusive care to their grandchildren. In Vietnam, for example, which we focus on in this report, up to 30% of the population in the largest cities are migrants, leaving grandparents in many rural areas as the primary carers for one or more grandchildren. The grandmothers in our case study, who live in the Mekong River Delta, often suffer from extreme poverty and are exhausted and anxious as a consequence of trying to do their best by their grandchildren.

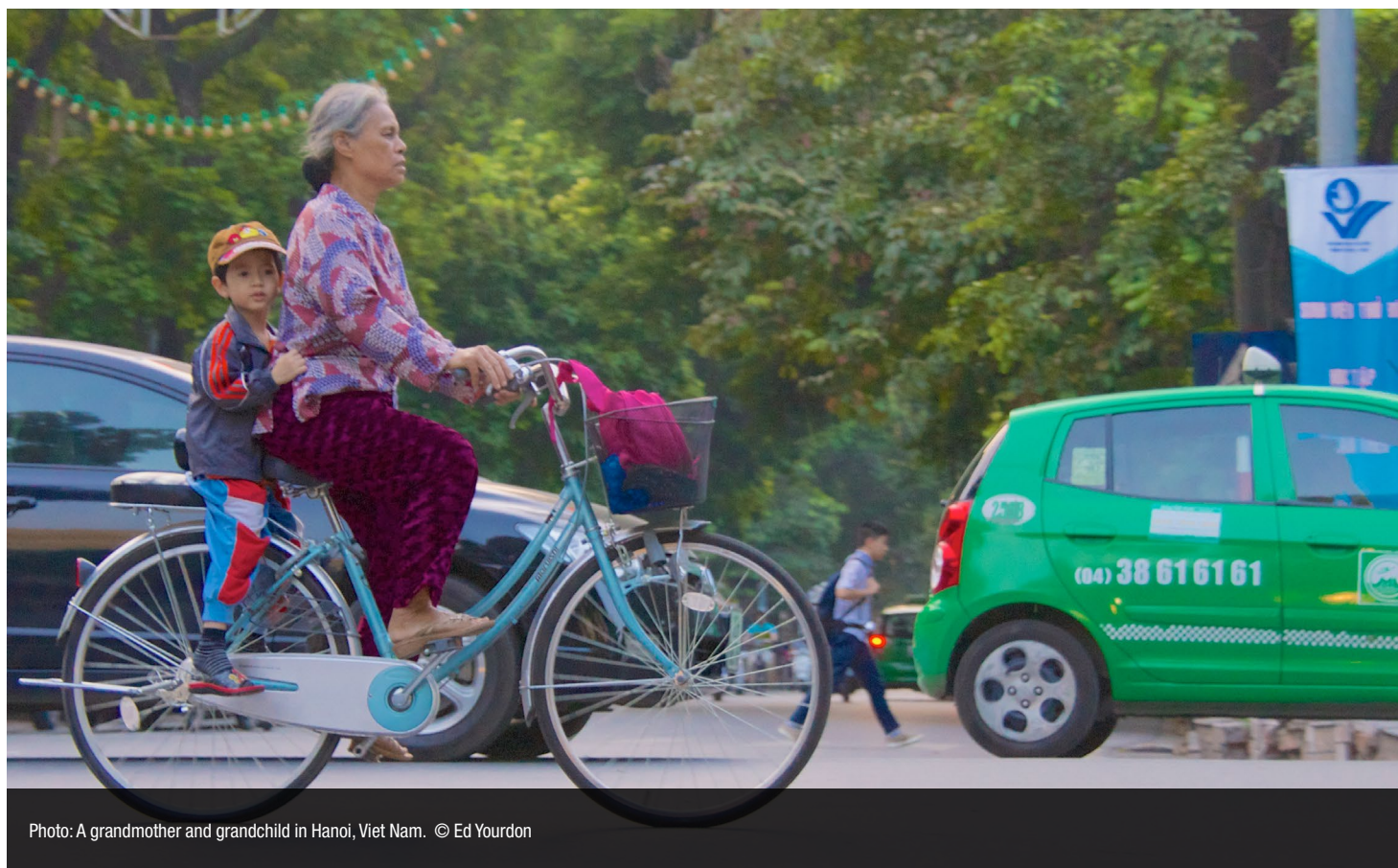


Photo: A grandmother and grandchild in Hanoi, Viet Nam. © Ed Yourdon

<sup>6</sup> Grimshaw, D. and Rubery, J. (2015) *The Motherhood Pay Gap: A Review of the Issues, Theory and International Evidence*. Geneva: ILO; Agüero, J., M. S. Marks, and N. Raykar (2012) *The Wage Penalty for Motherhood in Developing Countries*. Working Paper. Riverside, California: University of California, Riverside.

<sup>7</sup> Woetzel, J., A. Madgavkar, K. Ellingrud, E. Labaye, S. Devillard, E. Kutcher, J. Manyika, R. Dobbs and M. Krishnan (2015) *How advancing women’s equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth*. McKinsey Global Institute.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## A failure of policy

Policy is failing these women and girls. Governments are failing to create solutions that work with the realities of women's lives. Too often the assumption is that managing time is only a problem when women are working in formal sector jobs, which means that the focus is on labour market provisions that give parents the right to take time off, protect breastfeeding and provide crèches. These are important for those women who can benefit from them. But such policies cannot help with the daily struggle faced by the vast majority of women in the developing world working in the informal sector to both care and provide for children.

Worldwide, more than 129 million women, who are not working in agriculture, work in the informal sector,<sup>9</sup> with the proportion ranging from over 80% in South Asia to 35% in Middle East and North Africa.<sup>10</sup> Conventional policy instruments and labour-market solutions do not reach them. In India, for example, less than 1% of women receive paid maternity leave.<sup>11</sup> The exclusion of the domestic workforce is likely to be even more acute given that nearly 30% of the world's domestic workers are employed in countries where they are completely excluded from national labour laws – as in Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia and Nigeria.<sup>12</sup> A focus on labour market policy alone is therefore myopic.

Two additional policy areas are important – social protection and early childhood care and education (ECCE). But both too often fail to account for the realities that women face. Social protection programmes, which support the poorest people in many countries around the world, provide income through transferring cash or giving work opportunities to women. This is often a crucial support – but it does not generally help to alleviate the time constraints faced by so many women. Indeed, when cash transfers have conditionalities attached, for which women are often responsible, and when public works programmes fail to recognise women as carers, they can even deepen such constraints.

ECCE – nurseries and other care programmes – benefits young children and appears to be valued by caregivers. However, existing programmes are centred almost entirely around the needs of small children and a focus on school readiness, rather than the needs of their carers. For example, care for infants and toddlers is largely confined to support for maternal care (that is, helping mothers to be better parents), while provision for older pre-schoolers typically covers just a few hours each day. Our case study from Gaza, Palestine, highlights some wider issues affecting the early childhood education system, many of which are common around the world.

## Examples of progress

Encouragingly, some countries are successfully responding to these challenges. Vietnam, for example, despite being a Lower Middle Income Country (LMIC), has in place a full array of labour market policies supporting care – including six months of maternity leave at 100% pay, paid paternity leave and paid breaks for both antenatal care and breastfeeding. Companies with large female workforces are also required to provide on-site crèche care or to subsidise private provision. South Africa, in turn, is one of only two developing countries outside Latin America and the Caribbean to ratify the International Labour Organisation Convention (ILO) on Domestic Workers (No. 189). Additionally, the country has put in place a number of creative policies to support children, with a premium on care – among these are the Older Persons Grant, which recognises the role of many grandparents in childraising, the child support grant and a disability grant focused on the needs of caregivers of children with disabilities.

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF and ILO (2013) Supporting workers with family responsibilities: connecting child development and the decent work agenda. Geneva: International Labour Organization (ILO) and New York, NY: UNICEF; World Bank (2015) Countries and economies data. Washington, DC: World Bank ([data.worldbank.org/country](http://data.worldbank.org/country)).

<sup>10</sup> ILO and WIEGO (2013) Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture (second edition). Geneva: International Labour Organization (ILO)

<sup>11</sup> Falcao, V. and Khanuja, J. (2015) India's unrealised maternity entitlement, *The Hindu* (30 March) (<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/indias-unrealised-maternity-entitlement/article7040790.ece>).

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF and ILO (2013) Supporting workers with family responsibilities: connecting child development and the decent work agenda. Geneva: International Labour Organization (ILO) and New York, NY: UNICEF.



# Policy recommendations

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## 1. Extend and implement care-related labour market policies to enable parents to combine work and care better, and to foster pay parity

Policymakers, together with development partners, should identify ways to extend labour market policies – such as maternity and paternity leave, parental leave, breastfeeding and crèche provisioning – to all workers, including those in the informal sector and those involved in domestic work. The provision of policies such as these is also a precursor to ensuring parity of pay in the workplace, thereby reducing the ‘motherhood pay penalty’. A useful starting point, especially given resource constraints, is to make sure that women understand their existing legal rights and that those rights are adequately enforced. Over time, attention should also be directed at ways to extend maternity benefits to women in the informal labour market. There is an evident need to pilot creative combinations of public–private partnerships and community-based approaches. Existing small-scale initiatives give some insights into how this could happen. India’s Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), for example, offer self-paid maternity insurance. While currently aimed at offsetting the health care costs of new motherhood, the programmes may provide a platform that could be expanded to include paid time off after birth.

## 2. Promote an integrated, multi-generation approach to social protection that is sensitive to care responsibilities

While social protection programming has the potential to be transformative for the poorest women and their families, the current situation is far from adequate. For example, the typically large needs of families dealing with disability are almost universally ignored, and only rarely is programming aimed across generations at grandmothers who provide childcare (as in the case of South Africa). Similarly, despite clear evidence that the provision of childcare has powerful impacts on women’s ability to work – and therefore their incomes – there are very few linkages between social protection programming and the ECCE sector. Mexico’s Estancias is one of a handful of social protection programmes focused on providing childcare to poor mothers, and South Africa’s Expanded Public Works Programme is the only programme that is making a large-scale attempt to engage with childcare as a public work.

To better meet the growing care crisis, governments and development partners should work together to shape social protection policies that adopt a more integrated, multi-generational approach that recognises that income is only one of families’ many needs. Such an approach would see families as units and provide multi-pronged support for young children, their older siblings, their parents and, where appropriate, their grandparents. This might, depending on context, mean coupling cash transfers and public work opportunities with subsidised childcare – keeping in mind that, given the cost of childcare, even less poor families are likely to need help affording the developmentally stimulating environments which young children need in order to thrive. In order to give all children the best chance in life, governments and development partners should consider options to roll out universal child grants, as in Mongolia.

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### **3. Promote universal ECCE, with a focus on the needs of caregivers and on the most disadvantaged children**

Scaling up ECCE services in low-resource environments is a herculean task given the size of the pre-school population in relationship to the size of the budget available. While evidence suggests that mothers value programming even when it focuses entirely on their children's developmental needs – rather than on their own needs for childcare – it is important to consider how ECCE programming might be leveraged to meet the needs of mothers (and other caregivers) and their children. This will require that programmes run for hours that align more closely with mothers' work schedules (and the school schedules of older siblings). Where full-day educational programming is not financially possible, we suggest investment in more recreational before- and after-school care.

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### **4. Provide adequate resources for scaling up ECCE, with a focus on care**

Providing large numbers of children with quality services is highly expensive, given that care is not subject to economies of scale. As governments, NGOs and private providers around the world have already discovered, keeping care affordable for parents – and good for children – requires difficult choices. Unless childcare is well-subsidised, providers invariably receive below-market wages and facilities may be substandard. One result is that the quality of care provided is often low. Accordingly, we suggest that governments work to realise the value of paid care progressively by monitoring fiscal space – and aiming to raise wages of ECCE frontline providers – over time, and that development partners support this objective. Governments – and development partners – could be assessed every five years (or however frequently progress toward Sustainable Development Goal targets is to be formally assessed).

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### **5. Include men in caregiving agendas**

While labour market policies that provide men with access to paternity and parental leave are a critical signal that men have responsibility for their children, the pervasiveness and strength of gender norms mean that including men in caregiving agendas will require explicit action. Direct efforts aimed at boys should be embedded in schools and recreational venues. These should not only encourage them to share their sisters' burdens, but also promote new models of masculinity that will make them better husbands and fathers. Through community-based organisations and educational sessions supported by social protection programmes, health clinics and schools, fathers should be actively integrated into childcare and helped to see themselves as central to their children's development.

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### **6. Invest in better data**

We need to understand better the circumstances of the millions of children whose parents are in employment, and how caregivers are coping with the joint demands of care and of employment – particularly where there are few legal protections and little public provision of care. To achieve this, better data will be crucial – on childcare around the world, what women want in terms of care support and better time-use data, disaggregated by sex and by age. We also know far too little about domestic workers – who they are and the type of work they undertake. Programming evaluations also need to collect better data on the time-use of participants along with other aspects relating to childcare.

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## **Conclusion**

Solving the global care crisis is urgent for the improvement of the lives of women and children. It must start with the day-to-day realities of these lives, embedding within policies and programmes an understanding that women's time is a precious resource that must be used carefully for their own benefit, that of their children and societies as a whole.

# Women's work: mothers, children and the global childcare crisis



Women do over **3 times** more unpaid work than men (including women who do paid work as well)



When parents work, often grandparents or older children plug the childcare gap.

In parts of Ethiopia, more than **50%** of rural girls aged 5-8 provide unpaid care on a daily basis.



Globally, over **35.5 million** children under 5 are being left at home without adult supervision

That's more than all the under 5s in Europe.



Many governments do have policies that support women to provide childcare:



**Enabling breastfeeding**



**Parental, maternity and paternity leave**

But these policies don't help the over **129 million\*** women worldwide who work in the informal sector.



For example, in India less than **1%** of women receive paid maternity leave.

## Governments must support parents better:



Extend labour market policies like maternity and paternity leave



Provide early childhood education services that meet the needs of children *and* carers



Invest in integrated, multigenerational social protection programmes



Encourage fathers to take more responsibility for childcare

\* This is a very conservative estimate based on the limited data available. The actual figure will be far higher.

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[#ChildcareCrisis](https://twitter.com/ChildcareCrisis)

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Cover photo: Rubina, a migrant worker on a nearby construction site, drops her and her neighbour's children at a mobile crèche on the outskirts of Delhi, India. © Atul Loke / ODI

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