

POLICY LESSONS ON ACCESS TO AND UPTAKE OF CHILDCARE SERVICES

GENDER INNOVATION LAB FEDERATION EVIDENCE SERIES

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GENDER INNOVATION LAB FEDERATION

The Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) Federation is a World Bank community of practice coordinated by the Gender Group that brings together the Bank's five regional GILs: Africa (AFR), East Asia and Pacific (EAP), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Middle East and North Africa (MNA), and South Asia (SAR). Together, they are conducting impact evaluations of development interventions to generate evidence and lessons on how to close gender gaps in human capital, earnings, productivity, assets, voice and agency. With over 188 impact evaluations in 66 countries completed to date, the GIL Federation is building the evidence base for governments, development organizations, and the private sector to increase uptake of effective policies that address the underlying causes of gender inequality.

Unpaid care work and the lack of access to affordable child care constitute key barriers to women's participation in labor markets. The International Labour Organization estimates that, in 2018, 647 million working-age adults were hindered from entering the workforce due to family responsibilities—94 percent of whom were women. In that year, women's unpaid care work amounted to three-quarters of total unpaid care work, with an estimated value of 9 percent of global GDP.¹ A pilot study by the MNA GIL in Egypt finds that, on average, mothers spent 11 hours per day on childcare and seven hours per day doing household chores.² The EAP GIL reviewed causal evidence on the effects of childcare interventions on maternal labor market engagement in low and middle-income countries and found positive impacts for 21 out of the 22 studies considered.³

Caregiving responsibilities significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{4,5} In parallel, cross-country surveys (including work by the LAC, MNA, and Africa GILs) indicate that both women entrepreneurs and women workers suffered more negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic than their male peers.^{6,7,8,9}

Access to affordable, quality childcare can allow parents to return to work, increase their productivity and have overall positive impacts on the economy. For example, an EAP GIL study finds that availability of preschools increased firm productivity in Indonesia by enabling more women to enter the labor market,

improving the allocation of talent, and matching of employees to jobs.¹⁰ Access to childcare can also improve child development outcomes, and enable older children to continue their schooling and focus on learning. **The GIL Federation is generating rigorous evidence around the world to understand what works, and what does not, in increasing access to and uptake of childcare services.** This note presents evidence on three key findings.

FINDING 1. AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE OPTIONS CAN HAVE POSITIVE IMPACTS ON BOTH WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The most vulnerable families need low-cost or free childcare options. In Burkina Faso, mothers working on construction sites as part of an urban public works component of a youth employment program often had to choose between bringing their children with them to dangerous work sites or leaving them home alone or with elderly relatives or younger siblings. After consulting with mothers and listening carefully to their needs, a pilot study trained selected women to provide high-quality childcare and equipped them to run mobile crèches that followed mothers as the public work sites changed.¹¹ A randomized controlled trial (RCT) by the Africa GIL finds that the provision of mobile crèches tripled the use of childcare centers for children up to age 6., demonstrating high unmet demand.¹² Access to

the crèches positively impacted child development, as well as women's labor force participation, their psychological well-being, and their financial resilience and savings.

Two other studies by the Africa GIL also find very high uptake rates of low-cost childcare services. The first study, an RCT testing an intervention that helped communities establish low-cost childcare services in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it finds positive impacts on both women's and men's economic engagement and household earnings, as well as on child development.¹³ The second study also finds high usage of low-cost childcare services developed by rural communities in Ethiopia through the country's Productive Safety Net Program. The impact evaluation of that study was suspended due to the conflict in Northern Ethiopia.¹⁴

These findings of simultaneous improvements in women economic engagement and child development are in line with a recent study by the EAP GIL in Indonesia showing that maternal employment can lead to improved child outcomes. The study pooled different data sources to construct a dataset with 32,000 observations of children aged 6 to 18.¹⁵ It used a two-stage least squares strategy exploiting exogenous changes in tariffs on female-intensive sectors to estimate the effects of maternal employment on child health outcomes. The findings indicate that maternal employment could have positive long-term impacts on children's development outcomes. Mothers' employment significantly increased children's years of schooling and enrollment in school, and positively affected health outcomes, such as height for age and hemoglobin levels.

FINDING 2. CHILDCARE SERVICES NEED TO BE OPEN DURING WORK HOURS TO FOSTER WOMEN'S PAID EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS

The EAP GIL analyzed the effects of public preschool expansion on women's labor supply and job quality in Indonesia. Using panel dataset covering 20 years and a triple differences approach to exploit variations in preschool availability over time and across districts, as well as preschool-age-eligibility cutoffs, the study finds strong impacts on women's employment (driven by unpaid family work) but no effect on earnings.¹⁶ The authors argue that the modality of preschools, operating only three hours per day, was unlikely to enable women to secure a paid job outside the home with longer time commitments.

A review of causal evidence on the relationship between childcare services and maternal engagement carried out by the EAP GIL also suggests that features that make childcare services more compatible with demands of the work day are important to maximize potential impacts of childcare services on women.¹⁷

FINDING 3. INFORMATION AND BEHAVIORAL MESSAGES CAN INCREASE UPTAKE OF CHILDCARE SERVICES AND FATHER'S ENGAGEMENT IN CARE ACTIVITIES

In 2013, Uruguay implemented a part-time fully paid parental leave for private workers to be shared between mother and father. However, only 4.5 percent of fathers take the benefit, while 70 percent of eligible mothers do. Key factors explaining fathers' low uptake include lack of information about the parental leave benefit, perceived financial costs associated with taking parental leave, and social norms dictating that childcare should be provided by the mother.

The LAC GIL conducted an RCT to examine the effects of an information and awareness-raising intervention (delivered via email and text messages) on men's and women's awareness and intentions of shared uptake of a parental leave program.¹⁸ The experiment provided information about the program to recent and prospective parents who met the social security requirements for it. The intervention was successful in increasing knowledge about the parental leave program, particularly among men. Messages about fathers' involvement and couples' planning also shifted women's views of traditional gender norms. However, the strong association between parental leave and breastfeeding led fathers to privilege the mothers' use of the leave benefit. These results show that low-cost, targeted information interventions can have substantial effects on program knowledge among potential beneficiaries. Furthermore, these interventions can support more equal gender roles and change gendered attitudes toward care responsibilities.

A pilot survey study by the MNA GIL in Egypt shows that women are not aware of the existence of childcare located nearby, stating childcare is a primary reason they are not working.¹⁹ An information intervention could be impactful in this instance. However, there is evidence that multiple constraints can affect the uptake of childcare services.

The MNA GIL, in partnership with the Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) in Egypt, conducted an RCT to evaluate the impact of subsidized childcare on mothers with young children and whether that could increase women's participation in the labor market.²⁰ The study cross-randomized two interventions: childcare subsidies and employment interventions. The uptake of both interventions was low, and there were then no effects on labor market outcomes. The study finds that safety, quality, distance, and family care issues were the main concerns for families not using childcare services. Restrictive gender norms were another key factor underlying the low uptake of interventions. Women

reported that leaving children with maternal and paternal family members was more acceptable.

The authors argue that given that women face multiple barriers, multifaceted interventions are needed to increase the uptake of childcare services. Improving childcare quality, accessibility, and affordability, coupled with shifting gender norms toward normalizing the use of childcare services, are important in informing policy design and increasing women's economic participation.





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