



Expanding Access to Affordable and Quality Care¹

- Women in LAC countries can spend around 4 more hours a day than men on unpaid care work, including domestic or household tasks, as well as on care for people at home and in the community. The contribution of this care work is significantly undervalued.
- Unpaid care work and the lack of access to affordable childcare constitute key barriers to women's participation in labor markets.
- Reliable and affordable non-parental childcare is intimately related to female labor force participation and to improved outcomes for women in the labor market. Non-parental childcare helps reconcile the conflicting demand for women's time on both work and care activities.
- In terms of policy, access to and subsidy of childcare services have the potential to lift some of the time constraints and help families transition through the initial years of parenthood.
- The WBG is working with governments and partners in LAC to expand access to quality early childhood education (ECD) and formal childcare services, with explicit or implicit labor market outcomes for women/mothers.

¹ This note was prepared by the LCR Regional Gender Coordination in the Poverty and Equity Global Practice. For more information, contact LCR_Gender_Coordination@worldbankgroup.org

THE CONTEXT

Although there are more women than ever in the labor market in the LAC region, this has not been matched by a corresponding improvement in their overall economic position. In most LAC countries, women continue to be overrepresented in insecure, (involuntary) part-time, informal, low-wage, and 'low-status' jobs. Gender and social norms, particularly in relation to the role of women as primary caregivers within the household, contribute to occupational segregation and the undervaluing of work women generally perform in the labor market. This is the case both within and outside the care sector. Although critical to social and economic well-being, unpaid care work has been largely ignored by economic and social public policy. Data for the region suggests that unpaid care work is valued between 15.2% and 25.3% of GDP (UN Women, 2020). In LAC countries, women can spend as much as 6.7 hours per day (or 28% of a 24-hr day) on unpaid care and domestic tasks compared to 2.7 hours per day spent by men (Figure 1)².

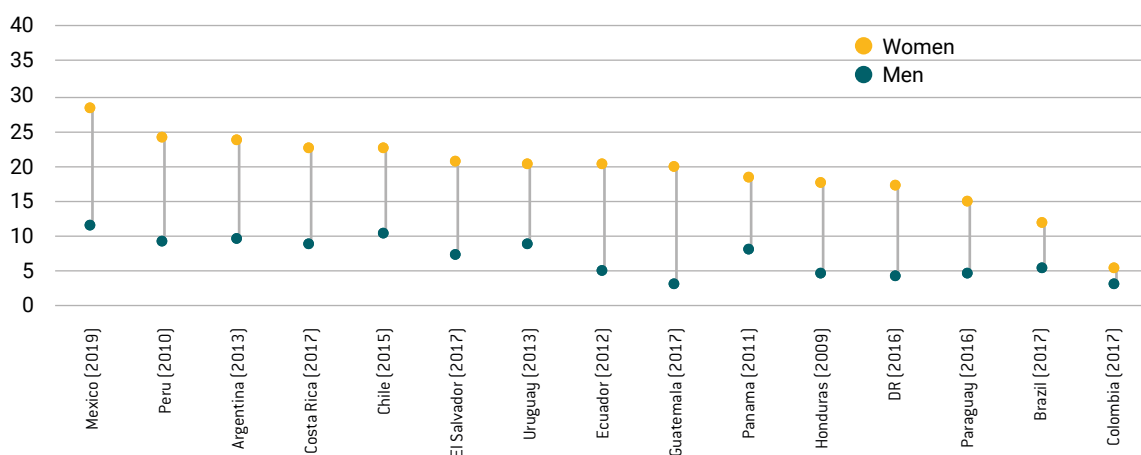
The COVID-19 pandemic widened the already unequal distribution of unpaid care at the expense of women and girls while exacerbating female employment. High-frequency phone survey data from LAC show that while men's domestic workload increased by 24%, that of women grew by 34%. For example, as the closure of schools demanded more educational support from home, higher shares of women reported spending time

accompanying their children's education. This increase in female care work correlated with a pronounced decline in female employment, which was more than threefold that of men. One contributing factor was that sectors that employed the largest percentages of women pre-pandemic suffered from the highest rates of job losses. (World Bank, 2022).

Evidence also supports that the deterioration in women's labor outcomes during the pandemic expanded beyond the economic domain into mental health. In fact, the time and opportunity costs of unpaid care work, as well as its sheer physical demands, have shown to have a severe and negative impact on women's well-being. Increased time spent on care work can reduce women's availability for paid employment, limit their economic independence, define the types of jobs accessible to women, and widen gender gaps. Even when care work is paid, it remains undervalued and often characterized by poor pay and working conditions. At home, girls and young women who take up additional responsibilities do so at the expense of their educational continuation, increasing their dropout likelihood. Alleviating the amount of unpaid care work performed by women and girls through a better access to care services and a more equal distribution of care responsibilities between women and men can enhance women's employment outcomes, labor force participation, and access to decent jobs.

Figure 1. Women in LAC Spend More Time Than Men in Unpaid Work.

Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work (% of 24-hour day) by sex, latest data



Source: World Development Indicators

2 The coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak and the subsequent containment measures exacerbated and amplified preexisting inequalities in terms of unpaid work burdens. Travel restrictions, the widespread closure of school and childcare facilities, at-home quarantines, and the increased risks faced by elderly relatives imposed additional burdens on women (de Paz et al., 2020).

EVIDENCE OF WHAT WORKS

For LAC, Mateo Diaz and Rodriguez-Chamussy (2016) conducted a review of a series of experimental and rigorous quasi-experimental evaluations of childcare interventions. Their results support the proposition that access to formal childcare improves maternal labor market outcomes; the review points to between 2 and 22 percent increase in the probability of the mother being employed if access to subsidized childcare is provided.³ Sizable increases in the number of hours worked were also reported in these studies. The following summarizes a few different tested interventions on expanding childcare provision and its effects on women's labor market outcomes.

- **The provision of subsidized childcare and financial assistance to those willing to provide childcare can increase the availability of childcare options and support working mothers.** The government of **Mexico** launched the *Programa de Estancias Infantiles (PEI)* in 2007 to support working mothers⁴ 14 years and older and improve children's well-being. The program provided subsidized childcare services to low-income mothers of children between 1 and 4 years old, who are either working or studying, while also providing financial support to persons willing to establish daycare centers and provide childcare services for low-income families. Findings from an [impact evaluation](#) of the PEI conducted in 2011 show that the program raised beneficiary mothers' labor force participation by 18% for those in secure employment and by 15% in short-term tenures. The number of working hours increased while the number of hours mothers spent caring for young children declined. Labor market gains were strongest among mothers who reported never having worked prior to the PEI.
- **The provision of public daycare in low-income areas can significantly improve maternal labor market outcomes.** In **Brazil**, an [impact evaluation](#) examined a program in Rio de Janeiro that expanded access to free publicly provided childcare to families living in the city's low-income neighborhoods. Results indicate that access to these services largely increased the use of care (from 51% to 94%) and mothers' employment (from 36% to 46%), and almost doubled the employment of mothers who were not working before the lottery took place. Robust evidence supports that the public provision of free childcare crowds out private provision, even in low-income neighborhoods. A follow-up [impact](#)

[evaluation](#) shows that having access to childcare creates substantial and lasting impacts on household income, expenditures in durable goods, and child investment.

- **The provision of afterschool care for older children increases female employment and triggers the use of daycare for young children.** In **Chile**, a [randomized impact evaluation](#) of the after school 4-7 Program for children ages 6-13, launched in 2011, found that the program increased mothers' labor force participation by 4.3 percentage points. The program also increased the use of any daycare for young children by 12%. The positive effect on labor force participation was larger for women with children under age 6 who were unemployed before the program—they saw a 19-percentage point boost. In line with these results, the program increased the use of formal childcare services for children under 6 years old by 6.5 percentage points. These results suggest that the 4-7 Program effectively met the need of childcare for older children and allowed women to take full advantage of the supply of available free childcare for younger children.
- **Informal home-based subsidized childcare programs can be an effective alternative for providing secure, reliable, and affordable childcare and allowing working parents (especially women) to engage in income-generating activities outside the home.** In **Colombia**, *Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar Familiar (HCBF)*, under the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF), encourages low-income strata parents with children aged 0 to 6 to form "parents associations" and elect a community mother (*madre comunitaria*) with basic education and a home large enough to receive up to 15 children. Children receive care and food (purchased by the government). Families pay a small monthly fee which is used for the salary of the community mother. The provision of childcare helped foster mothers' labor force participation as a way to improve household income. A [study](#) on the long- and medium-run effects of the program found that HCBF increased average female employment rate by 31% and average hours of work by 75 hours per month.

More recently, the World Bank's [Latin America and the Caribbean Gender Innovation Lab \(LACGIL\)](#)⁵ produced evidence on the effects of information and behavioral campaigns on father's engagement in care activities.

3 The author's review included studies showing positive effects of publicly financed childcare programs in Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador and Chile; and positive effects of preschool expansion in Argentina. There is mixed evidence on the impact on female and household income.

4 Only 3% of parents registered in the program are single-fathers. In the report, mother refers also to single fathers and other guardians participating in the program.

5 LACGIL conducts impact evaluations which assess the outcome of development interventions in LAC to generate evidence on how to close the gender gap in earnings, productivity, assets, and agency. CGIL focuses on five thematic areas: (1) remove barriers to human capital investment and to the productive engagement of NEETs; (2) remove barriers to participation and productivity of women in paid work and entrepreneurship; (3) assess the role of social norms in perpetuating gender gaps in the region and assess interventions that drive changes, specifically for gender-based violence; and (4) better understand the role of agency in the promotion of gender equity. This section summarizes the results of impact evaluations of interventions and studies to improve the quality of female labor force participation in LAC.

- **Low-cost targeted information interventions can encourage father's engagement in care activities.** In **Uruguay**, the World Bank, UN Women, local academia, and the Uruguayan National Office of Social Security collaborated to design, implement, and evaluate an information and awareness-raising intervention that encouraged fathers to take part-time, paid parental leave. In 2013, Uruguay implemented a fully paid, part-time parental leave for fathers and mothers in the private sector. However, only 4.5% of eligible fathers

took leave. Main factors linked to this behavior include (i) lack of information about the parental leave benefit; (ii) perceived financial costs associated with taking parental leave; and (iii) social norms dictating that childcare should be provided by the mother. By providing information via email and text messages, the intervention increased knowledge about parental leave, particularly among men.⁶ Messages about fathers' involvement and care planning also shifted traditional gender norms among mothers.

HOW ARE WBG PROJECTS ADDRESSING THIS ISSUE?

The WBG is working with governments and partners in LAC to expand access to quality early childhood education (ECD) and childcare services, with explicit or implicit labor market outcomes for women/mothers.

- In **El Salvador**, the [Comprehensive Early Childhood Development](#) (P171316) project supports the implementation of early childhood education as it recognizes the critical role of quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) services in fostering mothers' workforce participation. By providing a secure and engaging environment for young children, ECCE services alleviate childcare responsibilities for mothers, enabling them to focus on their careers. To enhance ECCE official centers, teachers and principles will receive quality in-service professional development, learning materials, and personalized coaching. Main beneficiaries of the project include vulnerable groups and children with disabilities, from indigenous populations, and from poor and rural households.
- In **Uruguay**, the [Improving the Quality of Initial and Primary Education Project](#) (P159771) provided support to increase access to early education for 3-year olds and to improve the quality of early education for 3- to 5-year olds through the construction and rehabilitation of 20 new classrooms in full-time schools, purchase equipment and fund school libraries of pertinent children's literature, expand the evaluation capacity in early education by continuously evaluating students across a number of key dimensions, and supporting the creation of an in-service training course on early education, which currently does not exist. A rigorous [impact evaluation](#) showed considerable learning gains from the full-time school model in Uruguay. Furthermore, full-time schools support proper nutrition through school-feeding programs and allow parents, and especially mothers, to work.
- In **Colombia**, the [Resilient and Inclusive Housing](#) (P172535) project's goal is to upgrade the quality of current housing and increase the availability of childcare and recreational areas for young children. This will help reduce women's time on household tasks, allowing them to engage in other pursuits. The project aims to target female-headed households including women working in the informal sector, single-parent households, and 'community mothers.'
- In **Brazil**, the [Acre Social and Economic Inclusion and Sustainable Development Project – PROACRE](#) (P107146) sought to improve the livelihoods of poor rural and urban communities in the state of Acre by increasing their social and economic inclusion. Among its activities to improve the delivery of basic services, the project expanded access to early childhood care for as many as 7,000 newly enrolled children between the ages of 4 and 5 in rural areas and provided annual preschool care for 1,000 children ages 4 and 5.

⁶ However, the strong association between parental leave and breastfeeding led fathers to privilege the mothers' use of the leave benefit.

RELEVANT RESOURCES

WORLD BANK RESEARCH ON THE TOPIC

Berlinski, Samuel; Ferreyra, Maria Marta; Flabbi, Luca; Martin, Juan David. 2020. [Child Care Markets, Parental Labor Supply, and Child Development](#). Policy Research Working Paper; No. 9427. World Bank, Washington, DC.

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Muller, Miriam and Jaen, Martha. 2020. [Complex Decisions between Care and Paid Work - A Qualitative Study on the Demand for Childcare Services in Mexico City](#). Washington DC.: World Bank. Policy Research Working Paper.

Querejeta, Martina; Olivieri, Cecilia; Tomio, Ailin; Castaneda, Jorge Luis; and Munoz Boudet, Ana Maria. 2023. [Sharing Parental Leave between Mothers and Fathers, Experimental Evidence from a Messaging Intervention in Uruguay](#). Policy Research Working Paper; No. 10340. World Bank, Washington, DC. World Bank.

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GENDER STATISTICS, INDICES AND MEASUREMENT TOOLS

- [UNDP Human Development Gender Inequality Index](#)
- [UNDP Human Development Gender Development Index](#)
- [World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report](#)
- [OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index](#)
- [World Bank Gender Data Portal](#)
- [World Bank World Development Indicators](#)
- [World Bank Women Business and the Law](#)
- [World Bank Global Index](#)
- [World Bank Group Enterprise Survey](#)

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