

Childcare in a global crisis: the impact of COVID-19 on work and family life

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The COVID-19 crisis that has engulfed the world during 2020 challenges children's education, care and well-being. Many parents struggle to balance their responsibilities for childcare and paid employment, with a disproportionate burden placed on women. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation of families had been described as 'a global childcare crisis'.¹ It is estimated that over 35 million children under five years old are sometimes left without adult supervision, a factor often linked to economic pressures on parents to work. With the arrival of the pandemic, 99 per cent of the world's 2.36 billion children found themselves in a country with some movement restrictions, including 60 per cent under some form of lockdown. This has made childcare an even greater challenge for parents.

Globally, the work of childcare is done predominantly by women. This includes mothers and also other female caregivers such as grandmothers, siblings and workers in the childcare sector. In 2018, 606 million working-age women considered themselves to be unavailable for employment or not seeking a job because of unpaid care work, compared to only 41 million men.² This imbalance has major implications for women's employment and income opportunities and for children's development and well-being.

UNICEF has previously called for a set of four family-friendly policies for children in the early years, comprising paid parental leave; breastfeeding support; accessible, affordable and good-quality

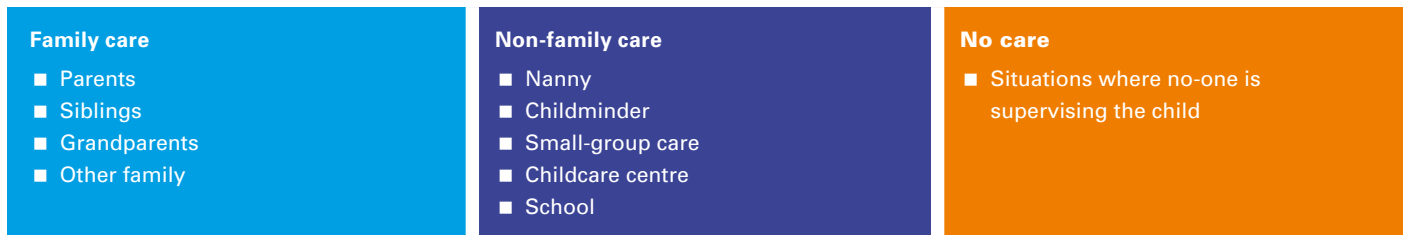
childcare; and child benefits.³ We have shown that even some of the world's richest countries fare poorly in terms of these policies, which is a reflection of their policy priorities rather than available resources.⁴

This brief takes a global perspective on one of these four aspects – childcare in the early years. In the current context of lockdown and school closures, lack of childcare is likely to be one of the worst affected services available to families. This paper paints a picture of current progress towards ensuring that all families have access to affordable and high-quality childcare, and considers the implications of the current COVID-19 crisis for childcare globally. We show how governments and employers can help parents to address the global childcare crisis through paid parental leave, followed by accessible, affordable and high-quality childcare. COVID-19 economic recovery packages have, to date, directed the vast majority of resources to firms rather than to households. This can be changed through public provision of childcare, subsidies, social protection floors and tax incentives.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF CHILDCARE

Care for children (up to school entry) can be provided through various means both within and outside their usual home(s) (*see Figure 1*). There are also times when children may not receive sufficient care.

Figure 1: Types of childcare*



Source: Based on ILO (2010) ⁵

* This brief focuses on childcare in family settings but we acknowledge that some children do not live with their family and may receive care within institutions and other settings

THE STATE OF CHILDCARE GLOBALLY

The care that children receive should provide them with affection, protection, stimulation and nutrition and, at the same time, enable them to develop social, emotional and cognitive skills. These goals can be achieved in many ways, including through high-quality childcare both within and outside the family. Rather than viewing one form of care as inherently better for children, this paper considers the benefits and risks within particular contexts.⁶

Decisions about who provides childcare not only affect the child, but also the people caring for them. Parents or caregivers who stay at home to bring up young children – most commonly women – forego other possibilities. Their lives are shaped in fundamental ways by this unpaid work. Globally, women are 4 per cent more likely than men to live in extreme poverty. The gender gap is much larger in the 25–34 age group, where there are 122 women living in extremely poor households for every 100 men.⁷ This has long-term implications for children’s well-being, including ongoing family income poverty. On the other hand, juggling the responsibilities of caring and earning can also have tremendous implications for parents. An estimate from 31 low-income countries in the early 2000s suggested that 39 per cent of working women cared for their children while also working.⁸

Family care

Care provided by parents

Most children receive their primary experiences of caring within their families from parents, siblings and grandparents. In 66 low- and middle-income countries with available data in 2014, women spent more than three times longer on care and housework than men.⁹ Family care has been found to have substantial benefits for children, including the development of early and secure attachments. Recent modifications in parental leave policies in some European countries, which provide time off for all working parents, with limits on how much can be transferred between

parents,¹⁰ are aimed at facilitating and promoting children’s early bonding with both parents and a more equal distribution of childcare between women and men. Similarly, being cared for by siblings, grandparents and other family members can facilitate the development of important bonds, and provide a nurturing and stimulating environment, especially in the early years of life.

On the other hand, not all family caring experiences are positive for children. For example, in 74 low- and middle-income countries, 80 per cent of children aged 2 to 4 years experienced violent discipline (including physical punishment and/or psychological aggression) from parents in the month preceding the survey. Its prevalence ranged from 1 in 3 children in Cuba to over 9 in 10 children in Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Palestine and Tunisia.¹¹ Being cared for by another child can also adversely affect the younger child through an increased risk of harm and injuries.¹² The primary involvement of females in early childcare is also a major factor in intergenerational transfer of gender stereotypes, and may contribute towards the formation of gender identities among young children.¹³

Even if family care is predominantly a positive experience for children, the implications for those caring for children also need to be acknowledged. In this context, the well-being and mental health of caregivers themselves are critical. For the parent, caring for a child can be one of life’s most gratifying experiences. Still, without adequate support, parents can become stressed, exhausted and forced to make sacrifices in their social life, education and employment.¹⁴ When women from low-income households start paid work, their overall workload of paid and unpaid work increases, as shown by surveys conducted in Colombia, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Uganda and Zimbabwe.¹⁵ Globally, 4 out of 10 working women fall outside social protection systems: 2 in 3 in sub-Saharan Africa and 3 in 4 in Southern Asia.¹⁶ These are regions with high proportions of women working in the informal sector: almost 90 per cent of women in Africa and 64 per cent in Asia and the Pacific were working in the informal sector in 2016.¹⁷ These are also the

regions where women are most likely to take their children to work. The requirement of multi-tasking – combining childcare and work – pushes some mothers into the informal economy,¹⁸ which leads to a direct loss of earnings and traps them in low-paid work. This contributes to labour market segmentation, with women concentrated in insecure but flexible jobs that allow them to have their children nearby, although this often compromises productivity, child safety and women’s well-being. It also reinforces weak or non-existent social protection coverage afforded to many informal sector jobs.

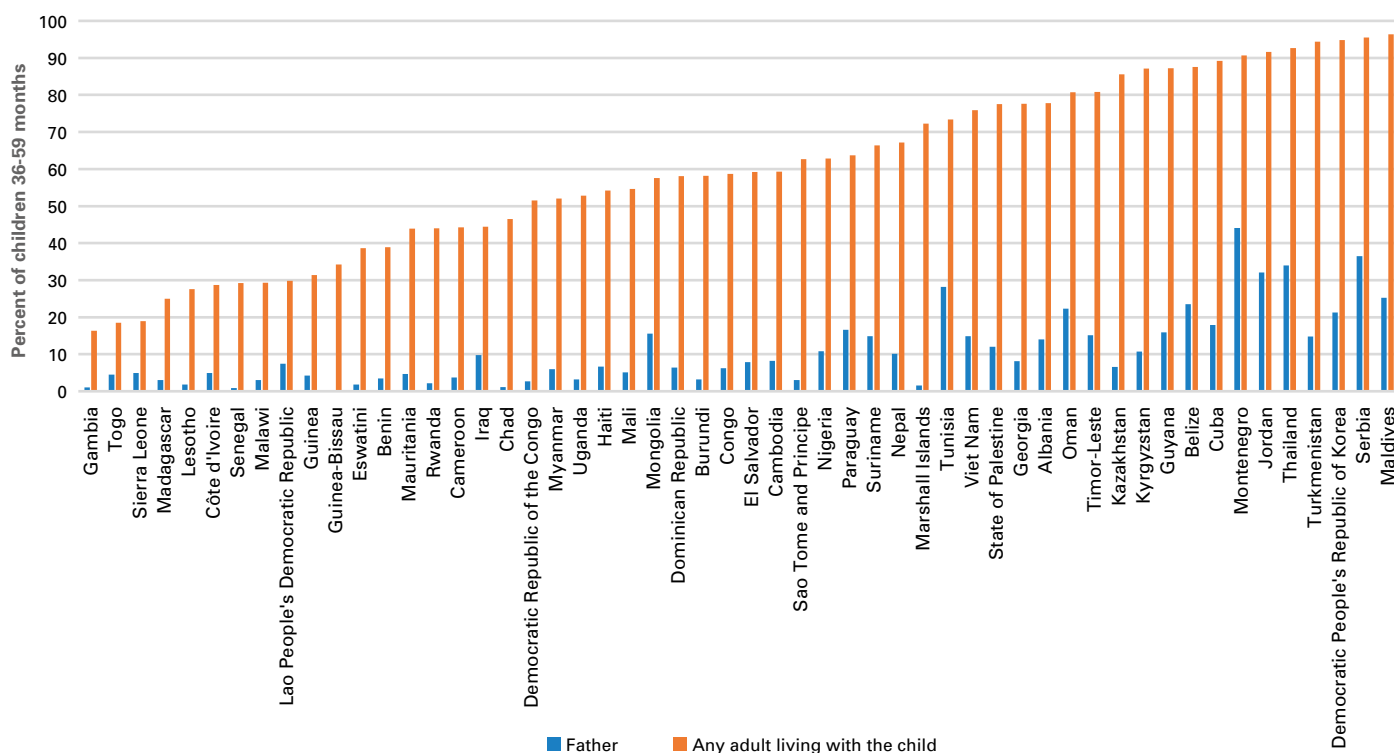
Stress, exhaustion and sleep deprivation, as well as a limited awareness of the importance of early years for child development, can hamper the quality of parental care. In 54 low- and middle-income countries with recent data, only 6 out of 10 children aged 36 to 59 months had received social-emotional and cognitive stimulation from any adult in the household during the three days preceding the survey, ranging from fewer than 1 in 5 children in Gambia, Togo and Sierra Leone to more than 9 out of 10 children in Montenegro, Jordan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Serbia and the Maldives (see Figure 2).

Mothers were the adults most likely to engage emotionally and cognitively with the child. In the same group of countries, fathers’ involvement was rare: only 11 per cent of children were engaged emotionally and cognitively by their father. This ranged from 1 in 100 children in Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and Gambia, to 1 in 3 in Thailand, Serbia and Montenegro.

Both at the individual¹⁹ and at country level,²⁰ children who were more likely to be stimulated by a mother were also more likely to be stimulated by a father, potentially pointing to care gaps between two-parent households in which both parents are heavily involved in childcare, and households with both parents spending little time on emotionally engaged childcare.

An example of the growing engagement of parents is provided in Jordan where, in the 1990s, research showed a widespread lack of awareness of the role of play and engaged care in children’s development. For almost a quarter of a century, Jordan has been running the Better Parenting Programme, which trains parents in nurturing children, including combating harsh parenting practices.²¹ An initial evaluation of the programme found improvements in knowledge and engagement, and positive changes in disciplinary practices.²²

Figure 2: Children with whom an adult household member has engaged in four or more activities to provide early stimulation and responsive care in the last three days



Notes: Only countries with data available for 2014–2018 are included. Social-emotional caregiving activities include playing with the child, taking the child outside the home, or singing songs to the child. Cognitive activities include naming, counting, drawing, reading or telling stories to the child.

Source: Authors’ presentation based on UNICEF global databases, MICS.

Care provided by grandparents

In most parts of the world, grandparents spend substantial amounts of time caring for their grandchildren.²³ Many children live in multi-generational households with at least one grandparent, or have grandparents as primary caregivers in cases where their parents have died or have migrated for work. The effects of being cared for by grandparents some of the time have been associated with more positive outcomes across different economic contexts, including pro-social behaviours and school engagement,²⁴ some aspects of cognitive development,²⁵ and health and education.²⁶ For grandparents who take on childcare roles within the family there may be both positive and negative aspects. For example there is mixed evidence of psychological impacts, and this may vary by context.²⁷

Care provided by siblings

Around the world, it is common for older children to take on a caring role for younger children, particularly siblings. In 31 low-income countries with available data, 15 per cent of children were cared for by siblings: 12 per cent by an older sister and 3 per cent by an older brother.²⁸ In some countries, as many as half of children under the age of five are regularly cared for by a child under the age of 10.²⁹ For 47 per cent of girls in Zimbabwe, 43 per cent of girls in Colombia, 27 per cent of girls in Uganda and 25 per cent of girls in Ethiopia, caring for younger siblings is a daily duty.³⁰ These proportions can be even higher in rural areas. For example, in some parts rural Ethiopia, most girls aged five to eight years care for siblings daily.³¹ Although older children can develop new skills and bond with their younger sibling, the role of childcare can interfere with their social life and educational progress. Taking on household roles of this kind has been linked to increased risk of school drop-out during early adolescence, particularly for girls.³² It can also create a vicious circle linked to household income: 23 per cent of children in poorer families and 6 per cent of children in richer families were cared for by their siblings.³³ Concurrently, children from poorer families already tend to have worse educational outcomes. This additional caring burden can lead to them falling even further behind.

Non-family care

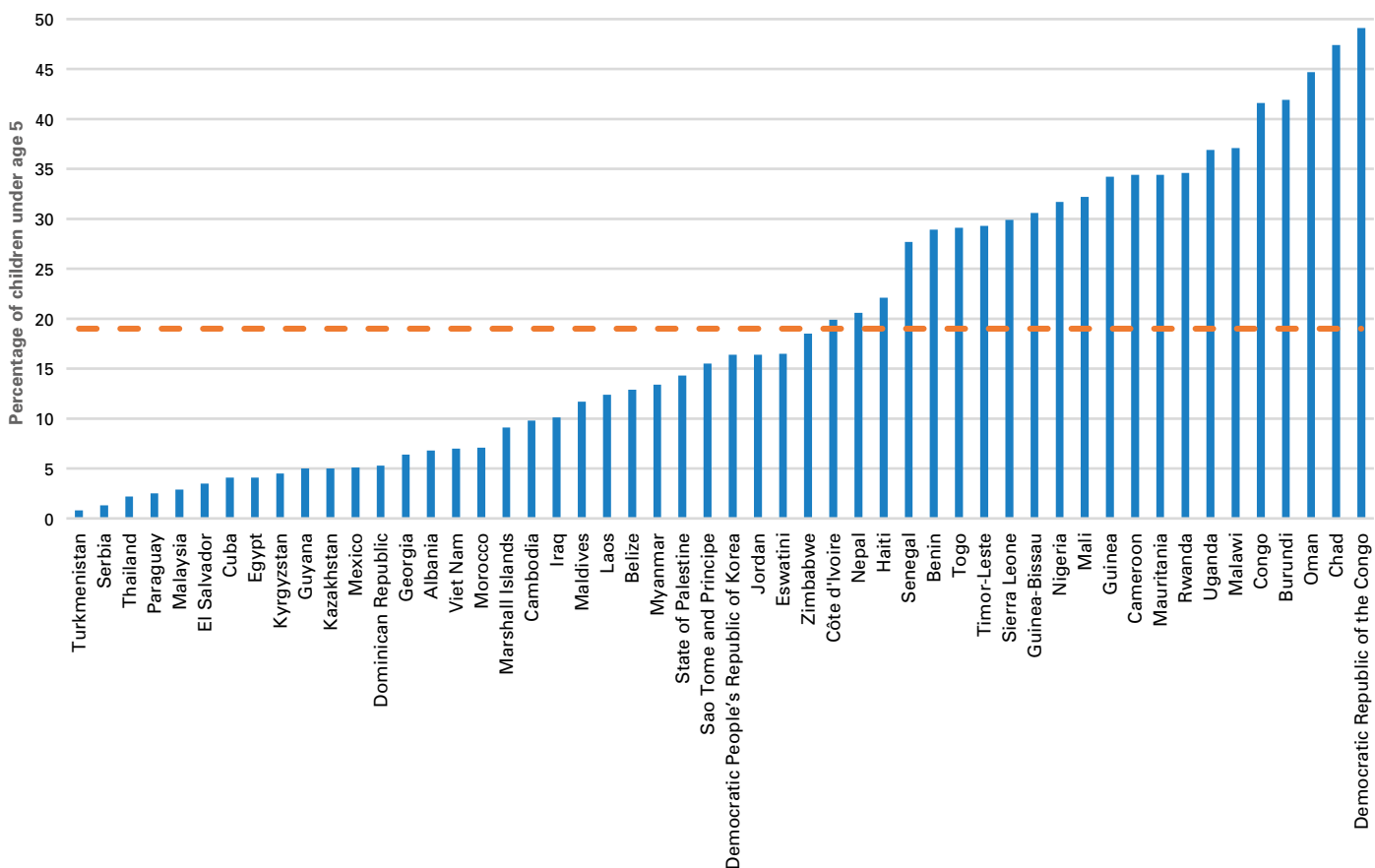
In richer households in low-income countries, a substantial amount of childcare is done by domestic workers. Globally, 70 million people are domestic workers, 70 per cent of them women.³⁴ Most domestic work is in the informal economy. Nine out of 10 domestic workers are excluded from social security systems, which means they have no rights to maternity leave or sick leave.³⁵ One in six is from a migrant background, a group that is vulnerable to exploitation and isolation.

The use of organized childcare outside the home is a solution that can relieve fatigued parents and enable them to attain a more manageable balance between caring and earning. High-quality, centre-based care may also have benefits for children in particular contexts. Some of the most compelling evidence comes from the USA, where long-term evaluations of experimental interventions have demonstrated positive long-term cognitive outcomes of good-quality early childcare, particularly those with an educational component.³⁶ This may be particularly beneficial in preventing children from disadvantaged backgrounds from falling behind their peers in cognitive development in the early years.

No care

As a result of the pressures described above, many children around the world are left without care for periods of time, even at very young ages. The neglect that children experience through the absence of care can have substantial negative effects on their development. In 52 low- and middle-income countries, an average of one in five children were without adult care for at least an hour in the week preceding the data collection, ranging from 1 in 100 children in Turkmenistan and Serbia, to 1 in 2 in Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (*see Figure 3*). Some of these children were in the care of a sibling under the age of 10. Others were alone. Another study estimated that the proportion of children under five years left completely alone ranged from less than 1 per cent to over 35 per cent across 61 low- and middle-income countries.³⁷ The decision to leave children uncared for can weigh heavily on parents, who are aware of the risks but are presented with an impossible choice of nurturing their child or earning money.³⁸ Being left alone at such a young age increases the risk of undernourishment and immediate physical harm (including death),³⁹ and has negative consequences for children's long-term developmental outcomes.⁴⁰

Figure 3: Percentage of children under age five left alone or under the supervision of another child younger than 10 years of age for more than one hour at least once in the last week



Note: Only countries with data for 2014–2018 are included.
Source: Authors’ presentation based on UNICEF global databases, MICS.

CHILDCARE POLICIES

We have painted a broad picture of what has been termed a ‘global childcare crisis’ in which caregivers, and in particular mothers, are ‘pushed to their limits by the twin demands of caring and providing for their families’.⁴¹ The clearest policy solution to this crisis is first to provide adequate and gender-balanced parental leave policies and then to improve access to organized non-family childcare, to enable both parents to balance caring and earning responsibilities more effectively and equitably. It is for this reason that Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a target to ensure that, by 2030, all girls and boys have access to good-quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education. The purpose of this target is to ensure that children are ready for primary education. It is also important that primary education is ready to receive children. Interactions with other children in a well-supervised group setting can support children’s social, emotional and behavioural development, thus preparing them not only for ‘education’ but also for their lives inside and outside school.

At the same time, the availability of accessible, affordable and good-quality childcare provides greater opportunities for parents and helps them to juggle their roles as carers and earners. There is a range of evidence that access to childcare⁴² and to early childhood education services⁴³ can facilitate women’s ability to do paid work, which has wider economic benefits for society.⁴⁴

For children, the benefits of high-input pre-school programmes with a strong educational component are stronger and more consistently found than the benefits of organized childcare more generally. Some of the most compelling evidence is from highly targeted and intensive initiatives and it is not clear to what extent this evidence transfers to more universal initiatives.⁴⁵ Much of the early evidence on this topic was from the USA. Yet, promising programmes in one context often do not transfer successfully to other economic, social and cultural contexts. The global base of evidence is improving, but there are still gaps, particularly in terms of longitudinal evidence into adulthood.

Access to early caring and educational experiences outside the home can have an equalizing effect on children’s development and life chances. The challenge now is how to ensure that such services are **accessible, affordable** and of **high quality**.

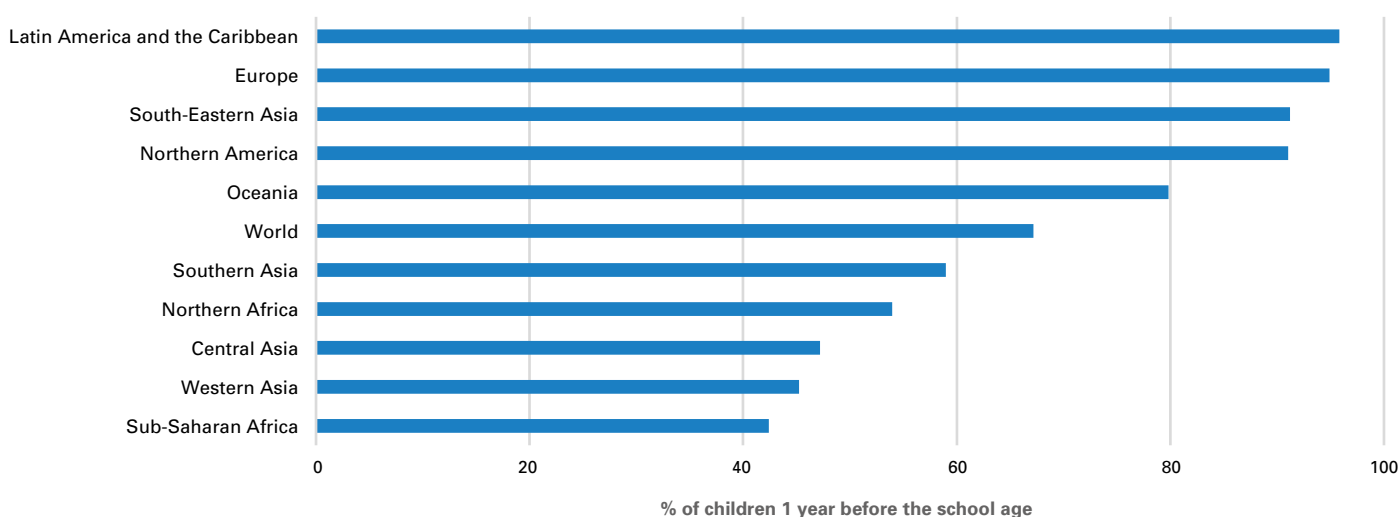
Accessibility

An imperfect measure of accessibility is enrolment. Out of 166 countries, 74 (45 per cent) provide tuition-free pre-primary programmes of at least one year’s duration, but this drops to 15 per cent for low-income countries.⁴⁶ By contrast, 96 per cent of countries provide free primary education.⁴⁷

Affordability

Pre-school enrolment has been found to be strongly influenced by GDP and childcare costs.⁴⁸ In 2018, Latin America had the highest pre-school participation, at 96 per cent (see Figure 4). Such high enrolment is possible due to affordability. Parents who use public services typically spend on childcare less than 20 per cent of per-capita household budget.⁴⁹ Similar enrolment (95 per cent) was quoted for Europe. Despite the continent’s wealth, 38 per cent of parents who used organized childcare found its cost difficult to cover.⁵⁰ The high cost of childcare is known to be a factor in deterring women from returning to work in the USA and other high-income countries.⁵¹

Figure 4: Enrolment in education and care one year before school age in 2018, by region



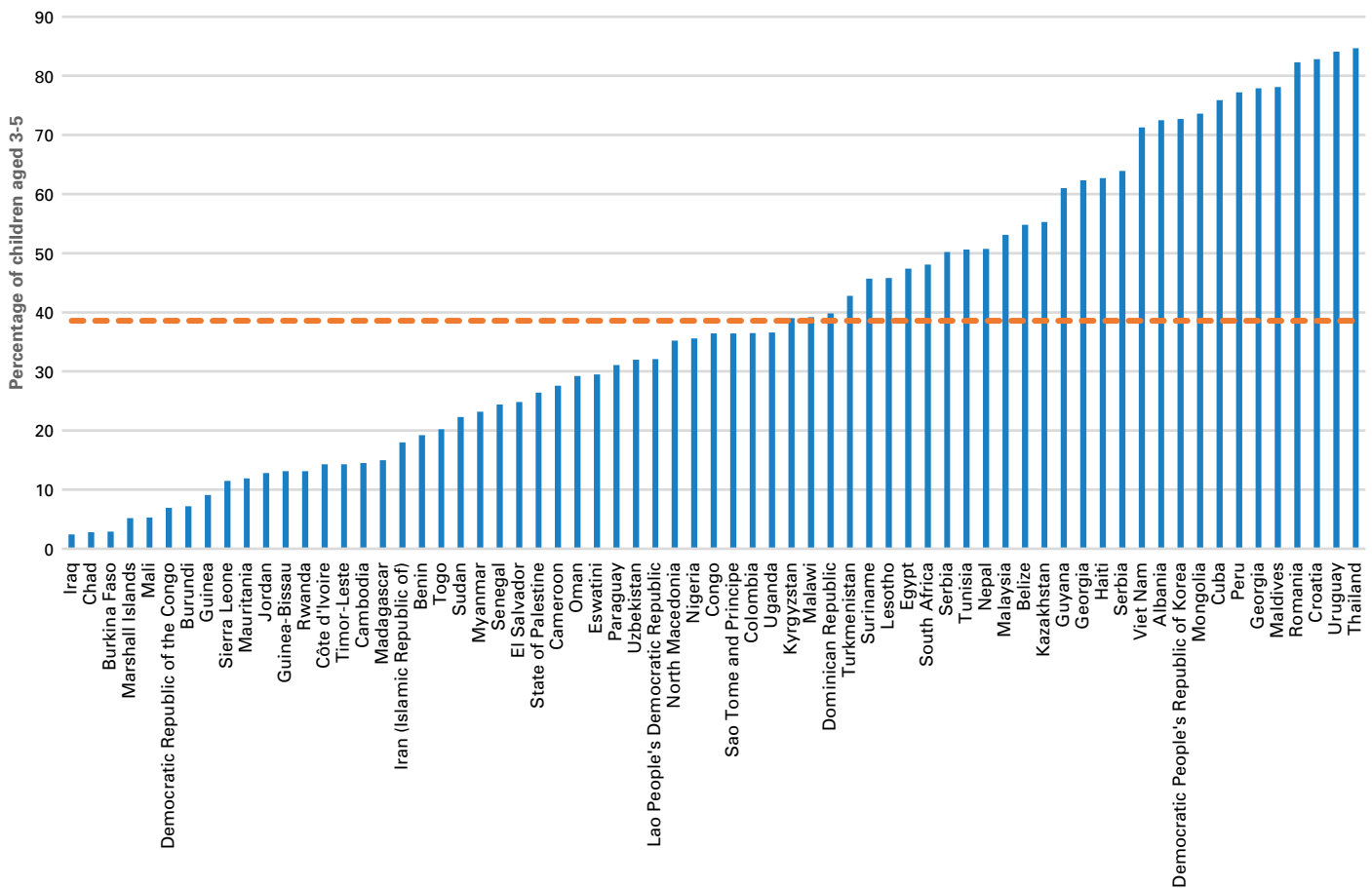
Source: UNSTATS, accessed 5 May 2020.

Variations in quality of childcare

Before school, some children attend childcare centres. In the 3–5 year age group, 39 per cent of children from 67 countries with available data attend childcare centres (see Figure 5).⁵² Programme quality is typically measured by caregivers’ qualifications and by the staff–child ratio. In the European Union, the average is 11 children per staff member in pre-primary, and 6

in early childhood programmes. Some middle- and high-income countries also manage to keep a good staff–child ratio. For example, the corresponding figures are 12 and 5 in Chile and 15 and 8 in Brazil.⁵³ The quality of childcare is closely related to the working conditions of childcare workers. These workers often receive low pay and are not unionized, particularly in the private sector.⁵⁴

Figure 5: Percentage of children aged 3–5 attending an early childhood education



Notes: Only countries with data for 2014–2018
Source: Authors’ presentation based on UNICEF global databases, MICS.

CHILDCARE IN THE COVID-19 CONTEXT

The COVID-19 crisis presents new challenges for childcare and for parents globally both in the short- and longer term. In many countries, the crisis adds an extra layer of difficulty on top of existing economic crises and other challenges. This includes humanitarian, fragile and very low-income settings.

The short-term challenges primarily stem from the measures taken by countries to attempt to control the spread of the virus. At the time of writing (May 2020), more than 80 countries have implemented partial or full lockdowns, affecting an estimated 1.4 billion children – approximately 6 out of 10 children worldwide. A further 100 or so countries have introduced restrictions on movement. These measures have often included the closure of childcare centres and schools. They have often also meant restrictions on other childcare options: for example, grandparents may no longer be available to care for their grandchildren. Additionally, this situation leaves caregivers with little spare time to prepare good-quality meals for their children. This combination of closures of services and restrictions leaves working

parents of younger children in a predicament in terms of balancing family and work life, which can increase gender earning gaps as women cut back on paid work to care for children.⁵⁵ Research on COVID-19 is still new, largely self-reported and based on small samples, but initial results indicate that 1 in 4 quarantined parents showed some symptoms of mental ill-health compared with 1 in 20 non-quarantined parents.⁵⁶ Government measures to ease these pressures have varied, as described in the ‘Spotlight’ feature below.

SPOTLIGHT: CHILDCARE SUPPORT IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

In the most recent update of the *Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures*,⁵⁷ nine of 195 countries report implementing childcare support in response to COVID-19. Examples of reforms include: the simplification of eligibility and access to child support and childcare benefits, including waiving health examination conditionalities (Austria) and simplified income reporting requirements (Germany); the continuation of support under special conditions,

such as the provision of childcare services for essential workers during lockdown (Costa Rica); the adaption of support to facilitate a move from day-care to home care during lockdown (Republic of Korea); the expansion of existing support, in terms of either leave or time available, coverage or amount paid (Poland, The Russian Federation); and the introduction of new support in the form of cash or vouchers, although eligibility rules may apply (Italy, Malta and Spain). These childcare provisions, as with many COVID-19 social protection responses, are temporary. Never-theless, each provides an opportunity for the expansion or development of flexible and equitable childcare support for all families.

LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

The shape of life after the initial crisis is gradually becoming clearer. In many contexts, as lockdown measures ease, parents are being expected to return to work, although schools and day-care facilities may still be closed and other childcare options restricted. This creates an extremely difficult situation for parents and potentially a highly vulnerable one for children. We estimate that the COVID-19 crisis has already disrupted childcare and education services for at least 40 million children about to start school.⁵⁸

The long-term implications of the COVID-19 crisis for childcare are not yet certain. While the implications for the mental health of both children and adults are as yet unknown, they may be substantial. What is already clear, however, is that a prolonged economic crisis is likely to follow the initial health crisis. This will place new stresses on many families with children. In low- and middle-income countries, 86 million additional children are at risk of household poverty by the end of 2020.⁵⁹

In the medium term, the reopening of life after the initial lockdown period does not mean that things will go back to how they were before. New measures will need to be taken to prevent further waves of infection, and this will have implications for many services, including childcare outside the home. Hygiene and distancing measures may require extra investment and/or reduced capacity, and this could make childcare less accessible and less affordable for parents. There may also be further waves of the pandemic, or similar crises in the future. It is therefore vital that governments and employers learn lessons about what has and has not worked, in terms of supporting families with children during the COVID-19 crisis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the global childcare crisis, there is a need to strengthen support for families with children in general, including the following recommendations.

1. Ensure adequate paid parental leave entitlement and related support for working mothers and fathers in the first year of a child's life to ensure that parents can spend time caring for and bonding with their child. Childcare support should immediately follow the end of parental leave entitlement.
2. Through government measures, improve levels of accessible, affordable and high-quality non-family childcare, especially for disadvantaged families. It is vital that such provision does not become a victim of austerity.
3. Invest in the non-family childcare workforce, and their working conditions, to provide equivalence with other professionals working with children, and encourage the highest possible standards in both applicants and practice.
4. Deliver and align childcare services with other key family care policies, such as universal child benefits, to strengthen the childcare portfolio, and reduce the risk of children's existing inequalities being replicated in public childcare settings.
5. Building on the data collection efforts of the SDGs, work jointly to improve the availability of comparable statistics related to childcare access, affordability and quality, for children of pre-school age, including for those aged under 3 years.

More specifically in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the following measures should be considered:

1. Invest in government measures to support non-family childcare through, for example, public provision of childcare, subsidies, tax incentives and legal requirements for employers to provide or support childcare.⁶⁰
2. In the face of the pandemic, many employers have adopted home working. However, working from home is not synonymous with flexible work. Employers should consult staff regularly to learn about their needs in times of restricted childcare options. Solutions might include flexible hours, compressed time, reduced overall time and staggered time.⁶¹

3. Even flexible time arrangements might be insufficient for single parents during a pandemic. Child allowances or partly state-subsidized paid leave should be considered in such circumstances.
4. To provide the necessary support to workers in the informal sector, governments can: extend access to social protection; ensure the rights and safety of essential informal workers; and support informal workers' organizations.⁶²
5. Employers can also support all working parents by being flexible in response to their situations and needs, providing services when parents have to take direct responsibility for care (infants, sick children and so on) and supporting referrals to public services.⁶³
6. During the COVID-19 outbreak, governments and employers, where relevant, should offer outreach to parents, particularly those in low-resource contexts. This could, for example, include public information campaigns and direct support and guidance on care, stimulation and play.
7. Governments should consider introducing social protection floors with basic universal social protection for families, including childcare support, building on the expansions seen in COVID-19 economic recovery packages wherever possible.
8. When providing COVID-19-related support, governments should recognize that parents in the informal economy do not always qualify for income support and services. Recognizing the universal commitment to children's rights, under Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, existing childcare benefits and services will need to be expanded to meet the needs of these children during the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath.
9. The economic and social repercussions of COVID-19 promise to be wide reaching and long lasting. COVID-19 responses globally have made limited use of childcare support, despite the impact the lockdowns have had on family work and care. Governments should provide more support for parents with childcare responsibilities, reflecting both the differences in vulnerability to lockdowns (loss of employment), and the persistence and depth of the economic crisis.

10. The pandemic and its socio-economic fallout present a range of challenges to the mental health and psychosocial well-being both of children and their caregivers. Many will overcome their mental health issues if their basic needs are met, and if family, peer and community support is restored and strengthened. For those who need specialized mental health care, governments should seek to ensure this care is available, accessible and provided in a non-stigmatizing way.

These steps may help to mitigate the worst effects of the crisis on parents with childcare responsibilities and their children. The SDGs have committed all countries to ensuring that all girls and boys have access to good-quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education (Goal 4.2) and to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work (Goal 5.4). Although these goals might be even harder to achieve during a global emergency, it is a question of priorities to safeguard investments in the future and ensure that children and their primary caregivers are not the ones to pay the highest price in times of crisis and global recession.

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