

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# A Multigenerational Perspective on Childcare: A Review of Rigorous Research in Low- and Middle- Income Countries



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Affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare<sup>1</sup> has the potential to address multiple, widespread challenges felt by families worldwide. Childcare may contribute to what many organizations call a ‘triple social and economic dividend,’ by improving early childhood development outcomes, increasing women’s participation in the labor market, and creating new jobs and businesses. As this brief highlights, childcare can provide benefits across two and sometimes more generations of family members.

However, research, policy discussions, and programs often operate in silos, focused on either early childhood development or women’s empowerment. In reviewing ten randomized evaluations of childcare interventions for this review, for example, all ten studies reported impacts for women, but only six considered any outcomes for children. Research on the impact on fathers, grandparents, siblings, and the household is especially overlooked.

Additionally, while the childcare workforce and service providers play important roles in the childcare ecosystem, research on their employment, income, entrepreneurship, and other relevant outcomes is limited.

In recognition of the potential of childcare to improve outcomes for children, their primary caregivers, other caregivers in the family and the household at large, IPA conducted a review of rigorous research, synthesizing findings from ten randomized evaluations of childcare interventions in low- and middle- income countries (LMICs). Particular attention was paid to the studies that report outcomes for both children and primary caregivers. The review also incorporates insights from quasi-experimental and other studies to provide context and complement the experimental research.

<sup>1</sup>Childcare can be understood as an umbrella term that is used to refer to a range of different programs and services, providing care and supervision of children, particularly to enable caregivers to work. Key points of variation include the age of the child, the quality of care, the emphasis on education, part or full-time care, and the formality of care.

# Key Findings from Existing Research



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**Cost as a Barrier:** The cost of childcare remains the most significant barrier to its adoption. Subsidies or public services that reduce these costs typically lead to increased use of childcare. All of the existing literature in this review focuses on free, subsidized, or small fee provision of childcare. Further research is necessary to define what constitutes affordable childcare for the poorest families.

**Positive Impacts for Mothers, Constrained by Gender Dynamics and Market Opportunities:** The majority of research on the impact of childcare focuses on mothers and finds that it positively impacts mothers' participation in the workforce, their productivity, and/or the types of income-generating activities they engage in. Childcare can also lead to increases in personal income or business revenue. However, the structure of

the family, such as whether it is a single or two-parent household, plays a crucial role in whether women's income increases. Gender pay gaps that generally favor men might cause two-income households to allocate more paid work opportunities to men rather than women, limiting the impact of childcare on mothers' income alone.

Additionally, gender norms and limited labor market opportunities present significant obstacles that can prevent mothers from experiencing the economic benefits of childcare. Beliefs and practices regarding women's work outside the home and restricted employment opportunities may prevent women from enhancing their earnings, even when affordable childcare is available. The availability of affordable childcare does not necessarily translate into broader gains in women's empowerment or shifts in household gender dynamics.

**Potential Impacts on Other Adult Family Members:** Research on the effects of childcare on adult family members besides mothers is scarce. Available evidence suggests that childcare can enable fathers or male partners to increase their labor supply and income and potentially secure more favorable employment. Additionally, it may enable grandparents to increase their income .

**Impact on the Target Child- Quality Programs can Enhance Child Development:** Research investigating the impact of childcare on children in LMICs is featured in slightly over half of the randomized evaluations studies identified for this review. Studies suggest that participation in high-quality, center-based childcare significantly enhances early learning and development outcomes for children. However, the effectiveness of these programs largely depends on the quality of care provided. Although many programs improve some early childhood development outcomes, they do not consistently improve all targeted outcomes.

**Impacts on Other Children in the Household:** The availability of childcare may also offer educational and employment benefits for older children in the household who are not enrolled in the childcare intervention. These children, who would otherwise be tasked with caring for younger siblings, can instead pursue their own educational and work opportunities, due to the reduction of time they spend caring for younger children.

# Future Directions and Research Gaps

**Incorporating a Multigenerational Lens in Research and Cost-Effectiveness Analysis:** More research on childcare interventions should be undertaken from a two- or multigenerational perspective. This perspective on childcare programming, policy, and research can lead to a better understanding of its full impact on children, primary caregivers, secondary caregivers (like grandparents or older siblings), and the household as a whole. Similarly, cost-effectiveness analyses for childcare should consider the full range of benefits provided by childcare beyond its impact on enrolled children or mothers alone.

**Ensuring Quality across Different Models of Care:** Development and innovation are needed to find effective and sustainable ways to meet the needs of all families, across urban vs. rural contexts, differing family and community settings, and in relation to existing public services. A critical concern is the quality of care provided and the potential tension between issues such as quality, affordability, and coverage, especially for the poorest families. Clear evidence from research on primary education indicates that costs will exclude children and families from services.

**Teacher/Provider Perspective:** The socio-economic and wellbeing impacts of childcare on childcare providers and the workforce is often overlooked. Research should explore how childcare interventions can create viable employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for service providers, while simultaneously ensuring high-quality care for children.



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