

IMPROVING ACCESS TO QUALITY AND AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE SERVICES: A win-win for Cambodian Children and Women

Why is childcare service important?

Every child has the right to quality care. Public and private investment in childcare is globally considered a foundation to human capital development and economic growth. The World Bank Group defines human capital as three domains which develop throughout a person's life: knowledge, skill, and health (The World Bank Group, 2020). The 0–3-year period is crucial to a child's brain development and long-term health. Access to good quality care, health services, education programmes at home or outside, and nutritious foods are fundamental for children worldwide. A lack of quality childcare can cause two key issues: malnutrition and fewer women in the labour market.



Malnutrition is a burden to the economy.

Child malnutrition can cause a high risk of premature death, slow brain development, and lead to motor skill impairment (World Vision International 2018; Sethi et al. n.d.; Cavnagari et al. 2023). In Cambodia, stunting amongst children under the age of five, a key indicator of malnutrition, affected over 1 in 5 children in 2021. Besides poverty, poor feeding due to lack of knowledge on good nutrition practices and early childhood care and development (ECCD) are key contributors of this outcome.

Lower labour market engagement. The lack of quality childcare services also restrict mothers' labour market engagement. Childcare in Cambodia is seen predominantly as the responsibility of women, usually mothers but also grandmothers, aunts, sisters and other female family members. Many working age women remain outside of the labour force, while others quit their jobs upon having a child, and often struggle to go back to work. A mother who quit her job after having her mother care for her daughter for a while added: *"When my mother looked after my daughter, she always got to eat whatever she wanted. She got sick for almost two weeks each month because of unhealthy food. That is why I quit my job - to look after her full-time."* When deciding to work, mothers of young

children tend to choose paid work that provides more flexible hours, often in the informal sector or self-employment, with detrimental impacts on their earnings. Working mothers commonly leave young children with grandparents or other community members with monetary or non-monetary compensation (Chhin, 2022; UN Women, 2020).

Limited supply of formal childcare in Cambodia. There are few private childcare services and those available are often not affordable for a large share of families, especially those in poverty. Only a small share of Cambodian families rely on formal childcare services, due to a mix of supply and demand constraints. Childcare service provision is limited, especially in rural areas. While childcare services are often not affordable, their quality standards do not meet parents' expectations. Limited knowledge of the benefits of formal childcare for development and the persistence of social norms around child rearing and women's work further inhibit the uptake.

Childcare standards remain a concern.

From the study on the supply of and demand for accessible and affordable childcare services in Cambodia¹, many mothers have expressed concerns about the negative effects of non-professional caregivers on their children's development and wellbeing. This is in reference particularly to children's poor nutrition, socialisation, health, and safety. They expect caregivers to provide attentive care, use good language, and communicate effectively with parents. Other expectations include a low children-to-caregivers ratio, provision of healthy snacks and meals, high security, health care services, playgrounds and toys, proper sleeping spaces, and a well-developed curriculum (e.g., teaching, language, manners, and playtime). Many caregivers, both parents and grandparents, allow the children to spend significant time on smartphones, especially when over the age of one year old, although being fully aware of the adverse effects of mobile phone usage.



.....
¹ Research report: Supply of and demand for accessible and affordable childcare services in Cambodia 2023



Women want to work. A recent study has shown that Cambodia has the highest female labour force participation rate—upto 80 percent— in the East Asia and Pacific region (Gavalyugova et al., 2019). Non-working mothers are keen to work or return to work, and both working and non-working mothers are interested in childcare for their young children where it is accessible, affordable, and reliable.

Working women benefit the economy. Good quality and accessible childcare services can promote women’s employment, reduce absences at work, and increase productivity, while at the same time improving child development. Both these benefits will ultimately improve Cambodia’s long term socio-economic development.

Gaps in policy, investment, and employer requirements.

In Cambodia, a set of legislations and policies guide the provision of childcare such as the constitutional law, education law, and labor law. Nevertheless, the demand for childcare remains unmet. This is largely due to a lack

of accessible and affordable services, and of public investment. Childcare centres are often not adequately equipped. Similarly, although Article 186 of the labor law requires businesses employing 100 or more women to either set up on-site childcare facilities or pay for childcare for children between 18–36 months, it is not systematically enforced.

There are also gaps in the law itself. Specifically, there is a lack of operational guidance on setting up accessible and quality childcare facilities and services, and the cost that employers need to pay workers to access childcare services. The law also mandates childcare services for children aged 18–36 months, while working mothers are allowed only three months maternity leave. This leaves women with babies aged 3–18 months without childcare, forcing many to quit their jobs.

A need for a childcare solution is emerging. There are clear constraints for women to participate in employment and other income-earning opportunities. Yet, it is essential for Cambodia’s economic growth now and looking into the future. Accessible, affordable, and good-quality childcare services are key to achieving this.

Childcare sub-decree. In response to the Royal Government of Cambodia’s commitment on child development and women’s economic participation, a specific childcare sub-decree for children aged 3 months to 3 years is expected to be formulated and endorsed. The childcare sub-decree should fill policy and financing gaps to ensure education for all. The sub-decree shall provide guidance to the national and sub-national government, development partners, employers, childcare providers, and communities, clearly identifying their joint roles and responsibilities on childcare establishments and investments.

Investment and sustainability. Linked to the childcare policy, public investment is key to accessibility, affordability, quality, and sustainability of childcare services. Employers must be required to comply with the law. User fees are also important for accessible and sustainable childcare services and must be applied equally for inclusive childcare services utilisation across the country.

Public awareness of childcare. Public awareness among parents, grandparents and other family members is vital. Multiple approaches are required to ensure the public's understanding of the importance of quality childcare for children aged 3 months to 3 years old. This includes early learning, social and interpersonal skills, cognitive skills, nutrition, and health monitoring.

Demand-based and affordable childcare services. One size cannot fit all. The research suggests different childcare modalities for different children and parents. It is important to ensure that childcare services are based on demand and are affordable for all.

Childcare data management and inspection. Develop a childcare data system with statistics of the service providers, registrations, and enrollment to help inform and improve childcare services in Cambodia. Childcare data is very important to inform government, employers, development partners and parents on investment and returns.

References

- Cavagnari, Brian M., Darío Javier Guerrero-Vaca, Tannia Valeria Carpio-Arias, Samuel Duran-Aguero, Andrés Fernando Vinueza-Veloz, María Paulina Robalino-Valdivieso, Yadira Alejandra Morejón-Terán, and María Fernanda Vinueza-Veloz. "The double burden of malnutrition and gross motor development in infants: A cross-sectional study." *Clinical Nutrition* (2023).
- Chhin, M. 2022. *Senior Citizens Take on Larger Childcare Role for Grandkids*. Phnom Penh Post, Cambodia <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-post-depth/senior-citizens-take-larger-child-care-role-grandkids> (accessed: 09.02.2024)
- Gavalyugova, Dimitria, and Wendy Cunningham. "Gender analysis of the Cambodian labor market." (2020)
- Sethi, Pranshul, Aradhana Prajapati, Tejesvi Mishra, Tanu Chaudhary, and Sumit Kumar. "Effects of Malnutrition on Brain Development." In *Nutrition and Psychiatric Disorders*, pp. 75-88. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2022
- Women, U. N., "Unlocking the lockdown: The gendered effects of COVID-19 on achieving the SDGS in Asia and the Pacific." Retrieved on May 7 (2020): 2021.
- World Vision International 2018. *Malnutrition Ending in Cambodia Is Possible*. 2018 Cambodia Policy Brief on Nutrition. <https://www.wvi.org/cambodia/publication/ending-malnutrition-cambodia-possible>