**[TacklingChildCare](https://www.dawn.com/news/1653646/tacklingchildcare)**

[Zofeen T. Ebrahim](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1702/zofeen-t-ebrahim)Published October 24, 2021 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer is a Karachi-based independent journalist.

AMONG the many lessons the world has learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic on how to build better, an important one is to address and invest in quality and affordable childcare.

In today’s Pakistan, with skyrocketing fuel and food prices, having safe and accessible childcare would help more women participate in paid work.

A recent editorial in this newspaper put the Pakistani women’s participation in the labour force at 22.2pc in 2020, a dip from 23.8pc in 2016, and much below countries with similar income levels.

There may be many barriers to a Pakistani woman’s labour force participation. But one that has consistently been ignored is the unpaid work she is burdened with and which makes it impossible for her to leave home to seek paid employment.

Her heart and mind are with her kids at home.

For many married couples who are living in an urban set-up and have been unable to time and space their babies, it is usually the husband who goes out to work, leaving the young mother little time to do much other than carry out household chores and take care of the kids. If it is a joint family, she has to look after the elderly parents as well.

While we may not have data for Pakistan, the International Labour Organisation’s 2019 report states that three-quarters of unpaid care work globally was carried out by women. This negatively impacts their participation in paid work. On an average, a woman spends 201 working days per year on unpaid care, according to the same report. It must be the same for Pakistan, if not more.

A 2017 report by the International Financial Corporation (IFC), on tackling childcare in countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Vietnam etc., made a strong business case in favour of family-friendly workplace policies. Among others it recommended employer-provided childcare, flexible work and paid leave to not only attract but retain employees. And this was much before Covid-19 came upon us.

Twenty-five-year old Rukhsana Mohsin, married with three kids — two sons and a daughter, aged between four and seven — works as a domestic help in a bungalow in Karachi’s Clifton area and may not fit the IFC’s corporate employee bill. But she is a paid worker nevertheless. She would be much more at peace at work, she said, if she could put all her children in a paid, safe and subsidised childcare close to her home in Shirin Jinnah Colony. That way she would be able to get full-time employment and earn more money.

Currently, working for just three hours, she has to rush back latest by noon to be able to relieve her sister-in-law, living next door, who takes care of her children. The latter picks up Mohsin’s two older sons from the nearby school and gives them lunch that is prepared by their mother before leaving for work. For this informal arrangement she pays her sister-in-law Rs1,500 every month.

But there are days when Mohsin gets a little late and has to suffer the wrath of the babysitter who is already overburdened with housework and taking care of three toddlers of her own.

With her sister-in-law unable to keep a close watch on the children in her care, or keep them busy with games and schoolwork, Mohsin says her sons often sneak out to play in the street without the latter even aware of it. Boys being boys, they often get physically hurt or meet with accidents and she has to leave work and rush home to take them to the nearby hospital.

This is not just Mohsin’s story but almost every Pakistani woman’s who wants to work outside her home to better her family’s economic situation or to put her education and skills to use, but cannot. When she does, both her heart and mind are with her kids at home.

Those at decision-making, mostly men, do not realise childcare can be an investment in human capital. It gives children, especially girls from marginalised communities, an opportunity for early education and developing socialisation skills. This investment can improve children’s nutrition because when there are two incomes, children eat more and better.

On the one hand, childcare gives many women an opportunity to do paid work, on the other, it provides many the opportunity to take it up as a business.

That is why Dr Anita Zaidi, president of Gender Equality at the Gates Foundation, wants childcare to be treated like a road — planned and built by the government. In an essay on March 8 this year, she wrote it should not be left to the mother or the families to figure this issue out, and in its absence, this “vital piece of public infrastructure is built on the backs of women’s free or low-wage labour”.

It is time to make the #TacklingChildCare hashtag go viral!

*The writer is a Karachi-based independent journalist.*

[**zofeen28@hotmail.com**](http://mailto:zofeen28@hotmail.com)

**Twitter:** [**@Zofeen28**](https://twitter.com/zofeen28)

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