Women Informal Workers Mobilizing for Child Care

by Rachel Moussié

Recent research from WIEGO and membership-based organizations (MBOs) in Brazil, Ghana, India, South Africa, and Thailand shows that women informal workers require quality child care services so that they can work and earn enough money to support their households (Alfers 2016). Without a safe place to leave their children during the day, street vendors may have to take their children with them while they sell their goods in crowded markets and roadsides, and home-based workers find it difficult to both care for their children and work at the same time. Migrant domestic workers may leave their children with extended family members while they are working in another city or country. For waste pickers, waste dumps are not safe for their children and they may have to leave them at home even if unattended. Others may not go to work at all; as a waste picker from Brazil said, "Without day care, I can't work. When there is no day care, I don't work" (Alfers 2016). Most domestic workers and many child care workers are themselves women informal workers lacking the necessary wages, working conditions, and social protection to care for their own children.

Maternity benefits and child care services are an important part of social protection systems. They allow workers to earn an income when their children are young and give them time to care for them at home. This is particularly important for women workers who are more responsible for child care and domestic work than men. For infants and young children, more time with their parents and quality child care services can enable their growth and development. In their organizations, women informal workers are already starting to mobilize for child care services in different ways. This brief provides MBOs with examples from Brazil, Ghana, and India of how women informal workers are mobilizing for child care. It gives ideas of what can be done to change local and national governments' perceptions that child care is not an important issue.

ACCRA, GHANA: Informal Head Porters Aisha Adam (left) and Hawa Latif (right) carry goods on their heads in Kantamanto Market. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage.

BELO HORIZONTE, BRAZIL: Doña Geralda, one of the founders of Asmare, raised 11 children during a time at Asmare when crèches were not available. She was a strong supporter in the struggles for child care. Photo: Sonia Dias.

Maternity benefits and child care for women informal workers deserve attention both from within their organizations and movements and from local and national authorities.

Brazil: Asmare Waste Picker Cooperative demands child care

The Asmare Waste Picker Cooperative (Associação dos Catadores de Papel, Papelão e Material Reaproveitável) was founded in Belo Horizonte in 1990. It is run by former street waste pickers who collect materials from schools, businesses and residences. The cooperative recycles 500 tons of materials every month, including paper, cardboard, plastics, and metals, and sells these to private industries. In 2002, Asmare set up a network with seven other waste picker cooperatives to increase their bargaining power and influence with government. The demand for child care services came up in participatory discussions with local assemblies because women were taking their children with them to work at the cooperatives. Government and waste pickers also wanted to put an end to child labour in waste pickers cooperatives. The municipal government encouraged waste pickers to discuss their needs, including child care, when the city held its participatory budgets process (Ogando and Brito 2016).

Asmare received support from two NGOs: Pastoral de Rua and Caritas, who along with the city's Sanitation Department set up a space within the recycling centre where they could leave their children. With the support of local government and donations from the Foundation Danielle Mitterand and Mendes Junior, a local business, the cooperative built a separate building next door for a child care centre (Ogando and Brito 2016). During this time, municipalities were given more responsibility for early childhood development services. Therefore, in 2004, the local authorities integrated the waste pickers' community child care centre into the public child care service – UMEIs (Unidades Municipais de Educação Infantil) – and it is now known as UMEI Carlos Prates.

The UMEI Carlos Prates centre provides child care mainly for informal wastepickers – 70 per cent of the places at the centre are reserved for waste pickers' children. It is the only child care centre in the city that is open from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. as waste pickers collect recyclables from offices once businesses are closed either early in the morning or in the evening. There are 27 trained staff members who work in four shifts to make sure that the 80 children at the centre are well cared for. This example shows how a committed and interested local government, a well-organized group of informal workers and supporting organizations can work together to establish services that cater to informal workers' specific needs.

BELO HORIZONTE, BRAZIL: Doña Maria Bras from Asmare cooperative. Photo: Sonia Dias

Ghana: Makola Market Child Care Centre

In Accra's crowded city centre, the women market traders in the new Makola Market bring their children to the market's child care centre. The Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) made space for the centre in 1987 when they were building the new market. Previously, women market traders would bring their young children with them, but could not look after them while working. Children were seen wandering around the market and mothers were worried about their children's wellbeing.

At first the centre was run by the office of Ghana's former first lady, Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, as a public service. However, with the change in government in 2000 the child care centre was handed over to the AMA. During this time, the quality of the child care service deteriorated because of poor management. Therefore, the Ghana Association of Traders (GATA) decided to take over the centre and run it themselves. The child care centre is practical for the traders as they know their children are nearby and in a safe environment while they are working. Mothers can stop by the centres during the day to breastfeed. Women head porters (*kayayei*) can also leave their children at the centre even if they do not work in the market.

Today the centre welcomes 140 children from the ages of one to five years old and hires 10 trained teachers. The centre officially opens at 8:00 a.m. and closes at 1:00 p.m., but by 6:00 a.m. many market vendors start arriving and leave their children with the teachers. The centre can stay open until 6:00 p.m. to accommodate market traders' working hours. Children benefit from the government approved education curriculum in both Akan and English, and are given a healthy meal at lunch time.

The costs of the centre are covered in part by the parents who pay monthly fees and a daily fee for meals. The centre allows workers with lower earnings to pay in installments. Some *kayayei* cannot afford the full monthly fee and give only what they can while the rest of the fee is covered by GATA. Market traders also support the centre by bringing fresh vegetables and fruit from their stalls when available. The centre is managed by a Parent Teacher Association which also includes the market executive leaders. It is routinely inspected by the AMA education and health divisions. There are new urban plans underway to modernize the market, and women market traders are advocating that space is made in the plans for a renovated child care centre.

ACCRA, GHANA: Informal worker Monica Agyei sells food products in Makola Market. Monica is one of more than 2,000 members in the Makola Market Traders Union, an affiliate of the Ghana Trade Union Congress. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage.

India: SEWA child care cooperative

The Self Employed Women's Association, founded in 1972 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is a trade union representing 1.8 million women workers in the informal economy across 13 states in India. SEWA members include agricultural workers, construction workers, domestic workers, home-based workers, street and market vendors, and waste pickers among others. In response to their members' demands, SEWA set up child care centres in Ahmedabad in 1986 as a cooperative called the "Sangini Child Care Workers Cooperative". Today SEWA runs 33 centres in Gujarat state: 13 child care centres in Ahmedabad, and 20 centres in the rural areas.

The centres provide a full-day child care service from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to suit women's working hours. Due to the full-day child care service, most working mothers (64 per cent) who use the SEWA centres said that they could increase their number of working days due to the support from the child care centre. The corresponding figure for working women using the government's Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) centres is much lower (12.5 per cent) as many of these centres are only open for two to four hours during the day (ASK 2011). Women using the SEWA centres reported an increase in their incomes ranging from Rs. 500-1,000 (US$ 8-16) per month, and for some this went up to Rs. 2,000 (US$ 32) per month.

The Sangini Child Care Workers Cooperative provides an integrated approach to child care ensuring children's education, nutritional, and health needs. The centres take in children from birth to five years old and each centre can care for a maximum of 30 children. There are two child care workers in each centre; they are SEWA members themselves and are chosen from the community. The cooperative members are the child care workers and mothers who send their children to the centres. A board made up of child care workers and parents is elected by the shareholders every three to five years. The democratic member control of cooperatives is a key component in ensuring quality (ILO 2016).

Parents pay Rs. 150 ($2.2 USD) per month for the child care service, though this only goes to cover 10-15 per cent of the running costs of the child care centre. The remaining costs of the centre are covered by government funding, SEWA ventures, and private donations. Government funding for child care has decreased due to budget cuts, and the Sangini Child Care Workers Cooperative is also receiving less money from government. SEWA child care cooperatives are of limited scale and can be used only by SEWA members. They do not want to compete with the public ICDS offered by the government. Instead

AHMEDABAD, INDIA: Jyotsna Mahendra, a teacher at BALSEWA run by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union for self-employed women in the informal sector. Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage.

they can complement existing public child care services and are an example of how workers can organize and manage their own child care centres if adequately supported by government funds. SEWA acts as a community monitoring agent for the ICDS centres; it actively works with the ICDS and its staff to improve the services they offer, as well as educating SEWA members about the services available under the ICDS and promoting their use (Alfers and Arora 2016). SEWA's experience in organizing women informal workers and running child care cooperatives means it is also well placed to mobilize for improved public child care services.

India: National coalition for child care – FORCES

Forum for Crèche and Child Care Services (FORCES) is a national network of women's rights, children's rights and workers' rights organizations in India committed to improving child care services for children from the period of conception to six years old (Ray and Raman 2016). The network argues that children's rights to care cannot be divorced from women workers' rights to social security and decent working conditions. FORCES started with 17 members in 1989, and in 2015 it had more than 450 member organizations across 10 states in India.

In 1975, India piloted and launched the Integrated Child Development Services to provide health, nutrition, and child care services to children from birth to six years old and mothers who were breastfeeding. Today, there are over 1.4 million ICDS centres across India, used by 83 million children. This is one of the largest public child care services in the world. However, there are many concerns about the quality and reach of the services.

FORCES has successfully influenced child care policies in India by using several different strategies. First, FORCES promotes legal entitlements around maternity and child care where these already exist and advocates for new legal provisions. FORCES encouraged the government to include child care services in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act so that women informal workers can benefit from public works programmes. Second, as maternity entitlements and child care cut across numerous government initiatives in health, education, food security, social protection, and employment, FORCES builds alliances with other civil society groups and coalitions such as the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (Right to Health Coalition), the Right to Food Network, and the Right to Education Coalition. This raises the profile of maternity entitlements and child care among other civil society organizations and can lead to policy change. For example, the 2013 Right to Food Act calls for the food and nutritional requirements of children under six and of pregnant and breastfeeding mothers to be met through the ICDS centres.

AHMEDABAD, INDIA: A group of women listen during a nutritional meeting about healthy foods at the BALSEWA center, which serves as a daycare and meeting center. Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage.

Finally, FORCES members at the state and national levels are campaigning for child care. In Delhi, FORCES received 15,000 signatures and pushed the media to highlight child care in the lead up to the state elections in 2015. In response, the incoming political party committed to building 300 public crèches. At the national level, FORCES wants to campaign with other allies, such as public sector child care workers, against the government's decision to cut the budget for ICDS and promote the privatization of ICDS centres by handing them over to private companies and NGOs (Ghosh 2013, Government of India 2015).

Conclusion

The examples show that there are many different actions informal workers and their organizations can take to address their child care needs. Child care provision through cooperatives and market associations, such as in the examples from India and Ghana, can be a way to meet these needs when public services are either inadequate or unavailable. However, each of these examples also highlights the role local and national governments must play to support and promote quality public child care provision. Social protection systems aimed at providing income security for all workers should include child care services adapted to women informal workers' needs – their earnings are so low they must work to provide for their households. In each example, workers' strength in demanding greater public support for child care services from government comes from within their own organizations and collaboration in coalitions with other civil society organizations. Taking on public child care provision as part of a broader workers' agenda can build confidence in the movement and retain workers' engagement in their organizations. Quality child care helps women workers earn an income and redistributes their unpaid care work. It also promises a better future for their children as young children can go to child care centres, leaving time for older siblings, especially girls, to go to school.

ACCRA, GHANA: Informal Head Porter worker Hakia Latif carries goods on her head and her child on her back in Kantamanto Market. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

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About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy-action network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO builds alliances with, and draws its membership from, three constituencies: membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy, and professionals from development agencies interested in the informal economy. WIEGO pursues its objectives by helping to build and strengthen networks of informal worker organizations; undertaking policy analysis, statistical research and data analysis on the informal economy; providing policy advice and convening policy dialogues on the informal economy; and documenting and disseminating good practice in support of the informal workforce. For more information visit: www.wiego.org