

# WIEGO Child Care Initiative

**A summary of research findings on women informal workers and child care from six membership-based organizations.**

**Summary Report by Laura Alfars**

## Introduction

In many societies, women take on most of the responsibility for caring for families – looking after children, the elderly, and the sick. UN Women (2015) says that across the world women spend 2.5 times more time providing care than do men. This is work that is very important for families and for society as a whole, but it is usually not recognized as work (Elson, 2000), and women do not get paid for doing it, which is why it is called “unpaid care work”. Many women also work to earn an income. They have to do so because otherwise the family does not have enough money. Women work because they want to as well; they feel empowered by contributing to the family income, and it adds to their independence. However, earning an income does not mean that women’s caring responsibilities become less – they are expected to be both carers and workers, and this can cause many difficulties.

We know, for example, that the responsibility for unpaid care work contributes to the fact that women are more likely than men to work in forms of employment which are insecure and where earnings are low. Women are more likely to work part-time or stop working while their children are very young (Cook and Dong, 2011; Razavi, 2011). That women are seen as carers can also affect earnings because women are much more likely to work in low-paid “caring” professions, including paid child care work and domestic work (Lund, 2010). In turn, low incomes mean that women do not have the time or necessary resources to spend on child care. This can leave them feeling depressed and guilty about not providing the kind of care they would like to provide for their children or family members.

Insecure employment, low incomes, and irregular labour force participation mean that women are, in general, much less economically secure than men. This economic insecurity can last for a lifetime, as the loss of income resulting from unpaid care work means that women are less



*Informal Head Porter worker Hakia Latif carries goods on her head and her child on her back in a market in Accra, Ghana. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage*



*A group of women listen during a nutritional meeting about healthy foods at the BalSEWA centre in Ahmedabad, India.  
Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage*

able to save money for their old age. While all women workers may experience this problem, informal workers in the global south experience it most acutely as they do not have access to the labour and social protections that can help formal women workers to manage child care and paid work. In this way the responsibility for unpaid care work generates and reinforces social inequality.

This paper is a summary of findings from a research study by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), and its partner organizations, all of whom are membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers. The study wanted to understand better how the responsibility for unpaid care work, especially the care of young children – affects the incomes and productivity of informal women workers. It also wanted to understand how women’s participation in paid work affects their ability to provide care for their families, and to find out more about how they manage to balance child care and paid work. The research aims to provide recommendations for the development of policies and programmes that could help informal women workers to better balance their responsibilities for providing care to their children and at the same time improve their ability to earn an income.

The MBOs who participated in the research were the Altimarjom Cooperative in João Monlevade in Brazil (representing the waste picker sector);

the Ghana Association of Markets (GAMA) and the Informal Hawkers and Vendors Association of Ghana (IHVAG) in Accra, Ghana (representing the market and street trading sectors); the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad, India (representing home-based workers, street traders, and agricultural workers); the South African Informal Workers Association (SAIWA) in Durban, South Africa (representing market and street traders and waste pickers); and HomeNet Thailand (HNT) in Bangkok, Thailand (representing home-based workers and market and street traders). In total, 159 women workers were interviewed between October and December 2015 using a combination of focus groups and individual interviews. Ninety per cent of the women interviewed were caring for children under the age of six years. For a full breakdown of the sample, please refer to the full study report.

## **The relationship between child care and the incomes of informal women workers**

The study found that there are different ways that child care can affect the incomes of women informal workers. These include:

### *i) Changes in the choice of employment*

We know from other research that when women have young children to care for, they tend to choose work that is more flexible, but where the working hours are not regular and where incomes are lower (Cook and Dong, 2011). The same was true in this study. In Thailand, home-based workers said that they knew that “working outside” the home would mean that they could do better paid and more regular work, but they felt it made more sense for them to stay at home, where they could earn an income, look after their children, and attend to household chores. Waste pickers in South Africa said something similar; that the reason they had taken up this very low paid work was because it allowed them to be flexible with their work hours, giving them more time to look after their children.

### *ii) Changes to work schedules*

Caring for children affects women’s work schedules so that they earn less money. In Accra, the best time for trading on the streets is early in the morning as people make their way to work and in the evening when people return home.





*The 6-month-old child of a garment worker naps while her mother sews at a garment factory in Bangkok, Thailand.  
Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage*

**“ Before when I didn’t have a small child, I used to work till late, around 16:00 or 17:00. Trucks bring good materials at the end of the day and I feel that I am missing out on all of this. ”**

South African  
Market Trader

day short in order to collect her child from child care, meaning that she missed out on buying the best wholesale products which only arrived in the market later in the day.

### *iii) Decreased productivity inside and outside of the home*

When women keep their young children with them while they work, this can decrease their productivity, which in turn affects their incomes. In this study, most of the women who kept their children with them while they worked were home-based workers. They complained that trying to work and care for children at the same time left them very tired and distracted them from making

However, “these are also the times when your child needs you most” – needing breakfast and to be taken to school – pointed out a Ghanaian trader. This means that women traders with young children may not be able to work during the most productive times of the day. Changes to work schedules can also affect buying as well as selling. In South Africa, a trader complained that she had to cut her working

their products. They also said that young children could damage the products they were working on, which meant that they would have to spend time repairing them. “My grandchild grabs and drags the fishing nets.... Sometimes they have rips and I have to fix them,” said a home-based Thai worker who makes fishing nets.

Some women who work outside the home also keep their children with them at work. This can be very difficult, especially for women working in public spaces where infrastructure is not appropriate for young children. In one case, a South African trader said that she could not come to work when the weather was bad because there was no shelter for her child.

The study found as well that the relationship between women’s care responsibilities and their incomes works in two directions. Care responsibilities affect the amount of money

**“ When children are not with us we can work faster...[my child] interferes with my work. I make rotis [flat bread] for sale. I’m always afraid that he will touch the hot griddle and burn himself. At other times he runs out of the house and I have to run after him to bring him back. ”**

Indian Home-  
based Worker



Kasha Solanki, a teacher at the BalSEWA daycare centre in Ahmedabad, India, sits with one of her 3-year-old charges.  
Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage

women are able to earn by restricting the time that they can work and impacting on the quality of time they are able to give to their work. At the same time, working for money also affects the quality and quantity of care that women can give their children. A number of women informal workers talked about the pride they felt at being able to earn money for the family. However, they also worried about what their long working hours did to their family life. In India, a woman complained that her family could no longer eat together because of their different work schedules. Women also said that they felt as if

**“ I take my child to work with me but when the weather is bad, like when it’s raining, is windy and/or very hot, because there is no shelter where I work, I cannot take the child with me to work so I stay at home. ”**

South African Trader

they were neglecting their children when they went out to work, worrying about the negative effects on their children’s education, health, and general development. They said that this increased their levels of stress and made it difficult for them to work properly.

There was a strong feeling from the interviews that the responsibility for child care should be seen as more of a collective

social responsibility because women simply did not have time to both provide income and adequate care for their children. In Brazil, the research participants said that they felt it was the responsibility of the state to support working women with policies such as accessible child care centres, as well as health and education programmes to compensate for the time that working mothers are unable to spend with their children.

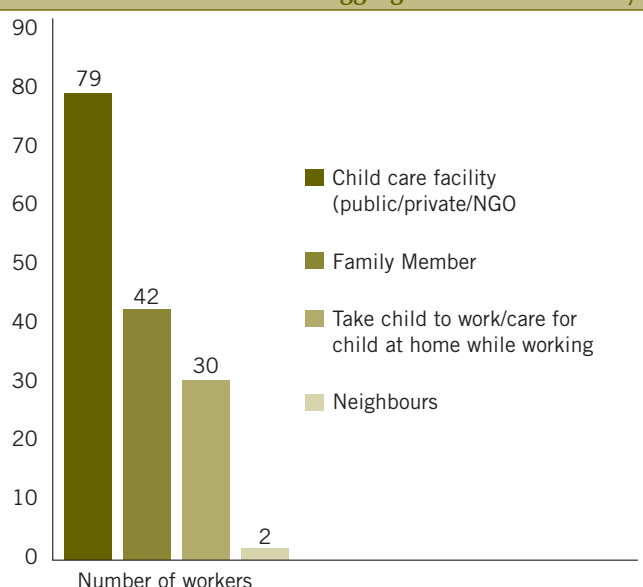
**“ Sometimes you can think a lot about the children when they are away from you; you see how other children are cared for and know that you are not doing much for yours. This can make you lose concentration in the market such that you simply cannot sell well. ”**

Ghanaian Market Trader

## Child care alternatives used by women informal workers

Figure 1 gives the breakdown of the child care alternatives used by the informal women workers interviewed in this study. The majority of the participants (57 per cent) used a child care facility as their primary form of child care while they worked. The next most common form of child care (27 per cent) was that provided by family members, usually a grandmother, an aunt or an older daughter, followed by taking children to work or caring for them at home while working (20 per cent).

**Figure 1: Primary Child Care Alternatives Used by Women Informal Workers Aggregated Across Country**



“Our children do not get the attention they deserve”





*A home-based worker sews garments while her grandchildren play in their home in Bangkok, Thailand.  
Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage*

A survey of 31 developing countries showed that only 4 per cent of working women had access to organized child care (UN Women, 2015). In this study, many more women had access to these services. This was because of the situation in the countries in which the study took place, and because the women interviewed were members of organizations which have attempted to both educate their members about child care services and, in the case of SEWA, have even provided such services to their members. Aside from the SEWA child care centres, women in India also have access to the free, state provided Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) centres. In Brazil, the state has provided free child care since the 1960s (Ogando and Brito, 2016), and in Ghana, women reported being able to send their children to pre-school from as young as one year old.

Not all the child care centres used by the women workers in this study were the same. The different types of centres they used can be summarized as follows:

- Public child care centres provided by the state (Brazil, some women in India using the ICDS, and Thailand where the Bangkok Municipality provides some free child care services)
- Non-profit child care centres provided by MBOs or NGOs subject to state regulation (such as that provided by SEWA in India)
- Private, informal child care centres run by community members not regulated by the

state (these were most commonly used by women in South Africa)

- Early education centres attached to schools (Ghana)

Not all women in this study wanted to send their children to a child care centre – a group of home-based workers in Thailand said that “caring for and raising our own children is happiness,” even if it was “exhausting” to work and care for children at the same time and kept earnings low. However, many women also said that they wished they did not have to keep their children with them when they were working, not only because it distracted them from their work, but because workplaces can be dangerous places for young children. This was especially the case for women who worked in urban public spaces, such as market and street traders and waste pickers, who said that they worried about losing their children or children running into busy roads. Home-based workers also told stories about young children swallowing dangerous objects that they used in their work, developing breathing problems because of inhaling dust and fumes, and getting lost in the neighbourhood while their carers were distracted by work.

Other women workers said that they preferred to have a trusted family member care for their children. However, the problems with such arrangements were also raised. In South Africa,



*Rattana Chalermchai works as a home-based garment worker while looking after her granddaughter in Bangkok, Thailand. Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage*

women complained that family members and neighbours must be paid for the care work that they do – it was not a free arrangement, and in Ghana women said that they did not always trust their family members to provide good care. In India, older daughters often have to provide care for their younger siblings, which prevents them from going to school (ASK, 2011). In Thailand, a large number of the women interviewed were themselves grandmothers who were caring for their young grandchildren so that their children could go to work. In many cases, their children were not able to contribute financially because of their low salaries, which meant that the grandmothers had to set up businesses in order to earn enough money to care for their grandchildren.

While women workers who used child care centres also had complaints, there were some real advantages for those women who were able to access them. Home-based workers talked about how much this relieved their stress and allowed them to concentrate better on earning an income. In Brazil, a waste picker who had recently moved to the city and had no family to rely on said that child care was essential to her being able to work, especially as the conditions of her work were hazardous and not suitable for children. “Without day care, I can’t work. When there is no day care, I don’t work,” she said. In India, SEWA’s child care centres have been shown to help women increase the number of days that they

work and increase their incomes from Rs.500-1,000 (US\$ 8-16) per month (ASK, 2011). Child care centres were also recognized for their ability to give children a good start in life by providing educational opportunities that mothers could not always provide. “I take my child to the school to get a bright future – I don’t want him to be like me,” said a Ghanaian market trader.

Considering these facts, the study tried to discover more about why 48 per cent of the women interviewed were not using child care centres. The most important reasons given included the following:

**Cost:** This is an important barrier to access, especially for poorer working women. In this study the cost of child care centres was a problem mainly for the South African women where there is no public provision for children under three years of age. The costs of child care do not relate to fees only, but also to opening hours and distance, which can drive up the costs significantly if they are not suitable.

**Opening Hours:** Opening hours of child care centres often do not match the working hours of informal women workers – they open after work has begun and close before work is finished. In this case, women have to make alternative arrangements, either relying on family or neighbours to fill in the gaps (which can increase the overall cost of relying on child care) or by shortening/altering their work hours.

**Distance:** If the centre is too far away from where women work and/or live, they are less likely to want to use the centre because of the inconvenience and cost of having to travel long distances.

“ I once took my child to a crèche... there were a lot of costs; before I went to work I had to pay for someone to look after the child while the child is waiting to be picked up by the car taking her to the crèche. The person also had to take care of the child after the crèche had closed...so I had to pay for this person, the transport and the crèche. ”

South African Trader





*Mayuri Suepwong is a single mom working as a home-based garment worker in Bangkok, Thailand. Her daughter helps her after school. Photo: Paula Bronstein/Getty Images Reportage*

**Quality of care:** This was an important concern for all of the women workers. The benefits of child care centres for women workers are much weaker when women do not trust the quality of care that is being given to their children. Not trusting the quality of care provided also means that women are more likely to use other types of care arrangements.

## Policies to support informal women workers to balance child care and income earning work

The nature of informal employment, with low incomes, long hours, and no labour and social protections, makes it difficult for women and men to care for their children in the manner that they would wish to do so. Improving the conditions of employment in the informal economy is important and requires broad economic and social policy changes (Chen, Jhabvala and Lund, 2011). At the same time, this research suggests that there is also a need for social policies to support women specifically in balancing their caring and work responsibilities, allowing them to improve their incomes, relieving them of stress and worry, and lightening the burden on other family members, especially grandparents and older daughters who often have to shoulder the care burden when parents are unable to.

The provision of good quality, affordable public child care centres is one important way the state can support informal women workers in this regard. SEWA has shown their child care centres can improve women's incomes and provide the children of informal workers with a strong foundation in life (ASK, 2011). UN Women (2015) also support this. They argue in their 2015 Report on the Progress of the World's Women that in addition to benefitting women workers and their children, public provision of child care centres can create more and better jobs for women as care workers. If this is the case, what kind of child care centres would best support women informal workers? As this research has shown, not all child care centres are considered to be equally helpful, and many are set up in such a way that informal workers cannot access them. Box 1 below summarizes the features of a child care centre that the women informal workers in this study said would be most helpful to them.

**“ When I had to look after my baby when he was an infant, I could do nothing else and lost my income. When I engage in some activity, I'd like somebody to take care of my child so that I can focus on work. ”**

Thai Home-based Worker

To benefit women informal workers most, child centres should:

- **Be affordable:** Child care should either be free or subsidized by the state.
- **Have opening hours to suit informal workers:** In Brazil, waste pickers organized and advocated for a child care centre that was open from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. to match their working hours. To prevent care workers being overworked, the day was split into four shifts (Ogando and Brito, 2016).
- **Provide care of a good quality:** Basic infrastructure should be in place, there should be enough trained care workers, nutritious food should be provided, and there should be an educational and health component included.
- **Provide good job opportunities for women care workers:** Care workers should be paid at least a minimum wage, have regulated work hours, and should have access to training.
- **Be participatory & community oriented:** Informal workers should be included as key stakeholders in the governance and running of the centres, and good channels of communication should be established between parents and care workers. SEWA has shown that if care workers from the local community are employed in the centres, these channels of communication are opened more naturally.
- **Be in a convenient location:** A conveniently located child care centre should be close to either the homes or workplaces of informal workers, so that transport does not increase the costs of care.

## Conclusion

The ability of families to care for their children is made more difficult by the ways in which the global economy is structured. For women informal workers especially, the situation is very difficult – they work to earn a low income and struggle to meet their basic needs, while also caring for their families. In this context, the provision of affordable, quality child care services is an important way in which to improve women's incomes and enable their economic, social, and political empowerment. Access to child care should be seen as a worker's right for all women informal workers, whether they are waged employees or self-employed workers, working inside or outside the home.

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