

# A Crucial Service: Three Child Care Centres in Bangkok

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Bangkok, Thailand is home to more than eight million people. As the commercial and industrial hub of the country, it attracts many Thais from less-developed regions, as well as migrants from neighbouring countries like Cambodia and Myanmar looking for economic opportunities.

For both locals and migrants, life in the city brings with it the challenges of raising a family and making ends meet. While many people find formal employment, a significant segment of the workforce is engaged in the informal economy.

Whether they work in formal jobs or in the informal economy as, for example, street vendors or home-based workers, working parents need someone they can trust to look after their young children while they earn income. Accessible quality child care is especially vital to ensuring women – who bear most of the responsibility for caring for children – can work.

Across the city, public and privately funded child care centres operate to fulfil this need. However, their resources vary by the type of support they receive.

## Lumsalee Child Care Centre

Lumsalee is one of these centres. When you step inside its walls, you step into a hub of activity. A mix of children between the ages of two and a half and five play happily on a plastic slide, swing or in a toy house. Others sit in classrooms covered in colourful letters and numbers, being guided through a range of learning and play activities. The centre, which was established 20 years ago, is publicly funded by the Bangkok Municipal Administration (BMA) and receives support from a community NGO. It is currently running at full capacity with 108 children and eight teachers.

The centre provides the much-needed socialization and basic skills children require as part of their preparation for “big school” and it keeps them safe while their parents work. The



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parents who send their children to Lumsalee tend to be factory workers, street vendors, home-based workers and housewives. Many are migrants from other regions of the country; some are from neighbouring countries as well.

## **Al Huda Child Care Centre**

Street vendors and factory workers also make up a significant percentage of the parents who send their children to Al Huda, another BMA-funded child care centre in the Nong Chock District of the city. Like Lumsalee, Al Huda takes in children between the ages of two and a half and five. It was established 20 years ago, on a plot of land owned by a private Islamic Foundation, which pays for the maintenance and extension of the centre and complements its staff salaries. Al Huda accommodates 220 children and employs 19 teachers.

## **Duangpateep Peace Stone Foundation Child Care Centre**

Both Lumsalee and Al Huda are fortunate to receive the bulk of the funding they require from the BMA. Duangpateep Peace Stone Foundation, a privately funded, NGO-initiated child care centre in Chalong Krung, is not as lucky.

Chalong Krung is illustrative of how important location and infrastructure are for the accessibility of child care. As an informal settlement on

the northern outskirts of the city, the area remains under-developed by the municipality, and is difficult to reach due to limited public transportation links. It was established two decades ago as a place to relocate people living in poor areas of downtown central Bangkok who had been evicted from their homes by the municipality. Many of those moved were informal workers whose businesses relied on their convenient downtown location. Moving away from the city centre reduced these workers' access to basic public services such as child care, clinics, reliable transportation and water supply. It also took away their access to markets and customers.

As there is no public child care centre in Chalong Krung, Duangpateep provides a vital service for both parents and the local government. Just two teachers care for 40 children between the ages of two and five each day.

The centre was established in 2004 by a foreign donation of one million baht (approximately US\$24,600 in 2004) from the Peace Stone Foundation. Until about five years ago, all the centre's expenses, including staff salaries, were paid by the Foundation. But then the Foundation withdrew with the expectation that the centre would do its own fundraising. The centre has a managing committee and the support of a local radio station to help with this but it's still a major challenge.





*At government-funded centres Lumsalee and Al Huda, parents buy a uniform but the school provides meals, snacks and mattresses for naps.*

## The importance of local government support

Duangpateep receives no support from the state. This lack of funding has had an impact on what the centre can offer parents and children. While Lumsalee and Al Huda have teacher-to-student ratios of 1:13.5 and 1:11, respectively, Duangpateep has a ratio of 1:20. That's double the expected teacher student ratio of 1:10 set by the government.

At Lumsalee, parents pay 2,200 baht per semester (twice annually) to cover electricity and water expenses. They also buy a uniform, but the school provides the mattress for children's naps as well as meals and snacks. At Duangpateep, the fees are considerably lower at 800 baht for each child per semester, but parents pay an additional 15 baht per day for the children's food, which equates to an additional 300 baht per month. So the total cost of two semesters at Duangpateep comes out to roughly 2,600 baht per semester. Therefore, the child care centre in the informal settlement is more expensive than the public child care centre, even though parents are less able to pay.

The lack of resources at Duangpateep is felt by the teachers, too. Kanlaya Kongpakdee has been working at the centre since she moved to the

area ten years ago. She finds it frustrating that the centre can't even provide adequate stationery for the children's learning activities. The children need to provide this themselves, and as a result there is not enough to go around, she says.

## Opening hours and activities

All three of these child care centres are open Monday to Friday, including during the semester breaks. At Duangpateep, older children often attend the centre during these breaks to keep them out of mischief at home. (While this provides a valuable additional service for parents, the increased numbers place further strain on the teachers).

Al Huda's opening hours are between 8am and 4pm. At Lumsalee, the hours for children are between 7:30am and 2pm. During these hours, older children are engaged in a range of play and educational activities across the three centres. This includes learning the alphabet, learning to count, rudimentary writing and art. For younger children, Lumsalee and Al Huda also offer essential life skills such as basic hygiene, toilet training and learning how to eat. At Duangpateep, where children arrive as early as 6:30am and can leave as late as 3:30pm, children are involved in play activities and watch television.



*The top priority for the parents is knowing their children are safe and well cared for.*

## **A gap in the system: What about children younger than two and a half?**

One of the major limitations of both public and private funded child care centres in Thailand is that they do not accept children younger than two and half years. Thai child care policy is based on the view that children should remain with their mothers until this age. However, this does not always fit the reality for parents who cannot afford to stay at home for such an extended period.

Migrants from other parts of Thailand often leave their children in the rural areas where they can be cared for by family members until they are four years old and can start in kindergarten. Others rely on the services of informal nurseries, which take children between the ages of zero to three. Such informal nurseries also offer afterhours care for older children enrolled in public child care centres whose parents pick them up later. But these informal nurseries are often under-resourced, lack state support, and tend to be more expensive than public child care at around 100 baht per day. While they are affordable for parents working in factories and earning the minimum wage of 330 baht (US\$9.25<sup>1</sup>) per day, the fees are too expensive for informal workers

such as street vendors or home-based workers who earn less.

## **Child care worker salaries and skills**

Kanlaya chose this job because she loves working with children. She says she does not do it for the money – and in fact her salary is quite low at 5,000 baht (US\$140) per month. Her colleague earns even less at 4,000 baht (US\$112). Kanlaya was in the same position until two years ago when she received an increase.

Kanlaya got her job through a social contact and was taken on a field trip as her training. She has no academic qualifications in early childhood development or child care, but she has learnt a lot during her 10 years at the centre.

Kanlaya's fellow teachers at the public child care centres of Lumsalee and Al Huda are better paid both because they have formal qualifications and because their institutions receive more financial support. Peeranat Puangmanee, one of the senior teachers at Lumsalee, has been at the centre for four years. Before this, she taught in a private kindergarten. She explained that the teachers' salaries are dependent on the level of qualification in the field. Although Peeranat is one of the youngest teachers at Lumsalee, she earns in the top salary bracket, a monthly salary of 15,000 baht (US\$420), because she has a university

<sup>1</sup> Currency conversions throughout this document are based on the mid-market rate of June 1, 2017 found at [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com): 1 rupee = .0155 US dollars.





*Saranya Kongrod, headmistress at Al Huda, is considered to be a “volunteer worker” and has no right to paid maternity leave, sick leave or annual leave.*

degree in early childhood education. Before 2016, Peeranat only received 8,000 baht (US\$224) a month. She was moved to a higher position when the mayor of Bangkok decreed that all child care workers with a university degree would receive a minimum monthly wage of 15,000 baht.

Peeranat says it was initially quite challenging taking up her leadership position at Lumsalee, given that some of her colleagues had more experience and had been at the centre for longer. But her degree was hard earned. Peeranat studied for four years and spent a further year completing teacher training. Peeranat’s colleagues earn between 8,000 and 15,000 baht per month depending on the level of their qualifications.

Saranya Kongrod, who has been teaching at Al Huda for 12 years and has been headmistress of the centre for the past eight, also earns 15,000 baht per month because of her qualifications. The salaries of her fellow teachers at the centre range from 7,210 (US\$202) to 15,000 baht but these are topped up by between 1,600 (US\$44.83) and 4,000 baht (US\$112) per month by the Islamic Foundation that supports the centre.

## **Challenges: Lack of recognition, limited benefits**

Although Peeranat and Saranya are advantaged because of their qualifications and salaries, they are in the same boat as unqualified child care workers when it comes to worker benefits.

Peeranat is only entitled to one month of maternity leave – without pay – and no sick leave. If she is unwell or has to see a doctor, she can take the day off but her day’s wage is deducted from her monthly salary. It is the same for her colleagues. “More than maternity leave, the most important thing for us is to have paid sick leave,” she stresses.

The low pay and lack of benefits for child care workers such as Kanlaya, Saranya and Peeranat are representative of how such care work is undervalued. It is socially and economically considered “women’s work” – a natural extension of their unpaid caring responsibilities at home.

Saranya at Al Huda explains that because she and her fellow teachers are considered to be “volunteer workers”, they do not have the right to paid maternity leave, sick leave or annual leave. Although they work at a centre funded by local government and provide an essential service for the Bangkok municipality, they are not considered civil servants. Nor do they have permanent positions; their contracts must be renewed annually. This has been a cause of dissatisfaction among child care workers, Saranya stresses. Some have complained to the District office and requested a change in their status—from volunteer worker to contract worker – so they can receive paid maternity and sick leave. But for the moment, if a staff member has a baby, she will usually take between 10 and 20 days of unpaid leave, Saranya explains.



*Kanlaya Kongpakdee has never missed a day of work in 10 years at Duangpateep. If she did, it would be deducted from her pay.*

Even high holidays are unpaid – for Eid, the child care centre is closed and everyone will lose out on one day's pay for the month.

Kanlaya has the right to take sick leave or maternity leave from Duangpateep, but as with Peeranat and Saranya, any period of absence from work is deducted from her pay. This is possibly the reason that Kanlaya has never missed a day of work in her 10 years at the centre. Even when she is sick, she comes to work. Sometimes if her colleague is unwell, Kanlaya covers for her while she goes to a doctor's appointment so that she won't lose out on a day's wages.

## **The impact of the job on workers' caring responsibilities at home**

Without the benefits of maternity leave, sick leave or family responsibility leave, the demands of child care workers' careers can have a negative impact on their caring responsibilities at home. Peeranat does not have children yet, while both Saranya and Kanlaya have children who are already grown, so they are not directly affected. But if these women did have young children, the lack of paid leave might make it impossible for them to work outside their homes.

Saranya was particularly fortunate when her kids were young as she worked as an accountant for an employer who allowed her to bring her elder child with special needs to work. At Lumsalee, Peeranat

notes that her colleagues with children rely on relatives to take care of them – a situation many working parents, particularly migrants, do not have.

Because government-funded child care centres do not accept children under two and half years, this also means that child care workers with younger children cannot enrol them in the centre where they work. The availability of such an option would make life much easier, allowing child care workers to accommodate caring responsibilities both at home and at work.

The reality is that although Thai child care workers and early childhood education teachers play a crucial role in the care and development of other parents' children, they lack adequate child care facilities for their own children.

## **The importance of trust and integration with the local community**

Trust and integration with the local community are crucial factors in the success of both private and public child care centres.

There must be trust for parents to enrol their children and support the centre in the first place. In fact Saranya stresses that the top priority for the parents is knowing their children are safe when they are at Al Huda, that they are always supervised and have a uniform so they are identifiable in the community.





*Government funding can play a vital role in ensuring a centre is adequately resourced.*

Community integration, including through financial support, also plays a crucial role. For Duangpateep, the local radio station assists the centre with their fundraising efforts. At Lumsalee, the primary school adjacent to the centre is planning to give one of its buildings to the centre. Peeranat says this will be a big help, as the centre currently sits on low-lying land that floods with heavy rains. The Al Huda centre receives support from the private Islamic Foundation that owns the land on which it is built; this Foundation pays for the centre's maintenance and extensions and supplements the teachers' income.

## What is needed for a successful child care centre

As these three child care centres demonstrate, community support, a curriculum that incorporates early childhood development activities, the provision of good nutrition, and trained and empowered child care workers are all key elements in a successful child care centre.

Success both depends on and benefits not only individual families who use a centre's services

but the surrounding community and the local government. Building trust and support within the community enhances the financial sustainability and social integration of such centres. And as demonstrated by Lumsalee and Al Huda, government funding can play a vital role in ensuring a centre is adequately resourced and that child care workers are fairly remunerated for their hard work. Government funding determines what services a centre is able to provide, and what training opportunities child care workers can access to develop their skills and potential.

A common challenge across both publicly and privately funded centres remains the fact that neither provide paid maternity, sick or family responsibility leave for care workers. This limits child care workers' ability to care adequately for their own families. This issue must be addressed if the teachers at Lumsalee, Al Huda and Duangpateep are to be fully recognized and supported for the foundational work that they do.

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