



**CHILDCARE FOR TOMORROW: POLICY,
ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER
EQUITY IN THE MALDIVES**

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Contents

Child care for Tomorrow Campaign	1
Acronyms.....	3
Acknowledgement	4
1. Introduction.....	5
2. Purpose of the Study, Objectives, and Research Questions.....	6
2.1 Objectives.....	6
2.2 Research Questions.....	6
3. Background Information	7
3.1 Access to Quality Childcare	7
3.2 Gender Employment and Wage Gap	8
3.3 Benefits of Quality Childcare	9
4. Survey methodology.....	10
4. Findings from the Quantitative survey	11
4.1 Demographic profiling of respondents:.....	11
4.1.1 More working mothers within the age group 30-39 years participated in the survey:	11
4.2 Access to quality childcare.....	12
4.2.1 Working mothers mainly depend on their family and friends to take care of their children:.....	12
4.2.2 Close half of the respondents were satisfied with current childcare arrangement:	13
4.2.3 Community lacks adequate child care options	13
4.2.4 Mothers concerned over the quality of childcare:	14
4.3 Gender employment and wage gap.....	14
4.3.1 Women spend on average 8 hours per day working:	14
4.3.2 Women prefer to take paid leave or reduce working hours than take unpaid leave to take care of their children:.....	15
4.3.3 Working mothers need a work-life balance:.....	15
4.4 Awareness on the societal benefits of quality of child care:.....	16
4.4.1 Most women see affordable high-quality childcare can increase household income:	16
4.4.2 More than three-fourth of the women see quality child care can reduce gender wage gap:	17
4.4.3 Working mothers have a positive impact on the society:	17
4.5 Workplace policies	18

4.5.1 Employers are most likely to offer flexible working hour policy than any other type of childcare benefits	18
4.5.2 Lack of family-friendly workplace policy hinders mothers from staying or entering the workforce.....	18
4.6 Family attitudes towards childcare	19
4.6.1 Family sees the importance of investing in childcare and early childhood education.....	19
4.6.2 Women face societal stigma in using childcare services but this does not affect their decision-making in seeking child care services	20
5. Findings from Qualitative Discussions	20
6. Conclusions and recommendations	24
6.1 Conclusion.....	24
6.2 Recommendations	26
References:	28

Acronyms

CAPI	Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing
CSC	Civil Service Commission
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GEAP	Gender Equality Action Plan
KII	Key Informant Interviews
SAP	Strategic Action Plan
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
YRB	Statistical Yearbook of Maldives

Acknowledgement

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the development of this study, Childcare for Tomorrow: Policy, Economic Empowerment and Gender Equity in the Maldives.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Maldives has seen a gradual promotion of women's empowerment, especially with increased economic and educational opportunities.

More women complete lower secondary education in the country (YRB, 2022). This lays a strong foundation for women's empowerment, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to the workforce.

A stark gender imbalance in managerial positions persists, with only 22 percent of female representation against 78 percent occupied by males (Census, 2022). Women's participation in formal employment is significantly low in the Maldives (Census, 2022). The value of unpaid care and domestic work done by women remains largely unrecognized.

These figures underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to break down barriers and ensure secure and formal work arrangements, social protection, and safety nets for women. Various efforts have been made by government to continue engaging women in the workforce. In 2019 the Government introduced six-month paid maternity leave for working mothers (CSC, 2014). The Government has also been working to expand financial inclusion for women, giving easy access to loans and mobile banking to facilitate greater participation in SMEs.

Despite these efforts, women face a multitude of challenges in their daily lives. Juggling long hours of work and household responsibilities often leave little time for family and personal pursuits. In addition to these challenges, they may face discrimination, physical demands, and a lack of benefits and opportunities for advancement¹.

Balancing work and family responsibilities can be especially challenging, as many people struggle to find the best care for their children while they are at work. The lack of child care services makes it exceedingly difficult for women to be employed or to take up leadership positions².

In the Maldives, the childcare crisis poses multifaceted challenges that significantly impact working mothers, their families, and the broader community. The "Childcare for Tomorrow" campaign by Benefit represents a critical initiative addressing the pressing childcare crisis in the country, emphasizing its profound impact on families, caregivers, children, and the broader society. Building on the success of previous campaign, this initiative recognizes the intricate challenges faced by working parents, particularly mothers, in accessing high-quality and affordable childcare. The multifaceted nature of this issue, encompassing limited options, safety concerns, financial constraints, and workplace inflexibility, has led to a cascade of consequences, including hindered child development and strained work-life balance for parents.

¹ <https://www.traveltrademaldives.com/editors-pick-breaking-barriers-the-resilience-of-working-mothers-in-the-hospitality-industry-of-the-maldives/>

²

http://maldivesmission.com/statements/statement_by_the_maldives_at_the_unga74_third_committee_on_a_dvancement_of_women

This report presents the findings from the study carried out to understand the challenges confronted by working mothers in Male', Maldives, concerning childcare accessibility.

This report is divided into three sections. Part 1 outlines the findings from the quantitative survey. Part 2 presents the key insights from the key informant interviews. Part 3 offers conclusions and recommendations for both short-term and long-term implementation.

2. Purpose of the Study, Objectives, and Research Questions

Purpose of the Study: This research seeks to comprehensively understand the challenges confronted by working mothers in Male', Maldives, concerning childcare accessibility. The study aims to shed light on the intricacies of these challenges, assess their socio-economic repercussions, and propose informed solutions aligned with the campaign's objectives.

2.1 Objectives

1. Investigate the challenges faced by working mothers in accessing affordable, high-quality childcare.
2. Examine the impact of childcare challenges on the work-life balance of working mothers.
3. Evaluate the awareness levels among working mothers regarding the societal benefits of quality childcare.
4. Explore the perspectives of working mothers on family-friendly workplace policies.
5. Examine family attitudes toward investing in childcare and early childhood education.

2.2 Research Questions

1. What are the primary challenges faced by working mothers in Male' in accessing affordable and high-quality childcare?
2. How do childcare challenges affect the work-life balance of working mothers?
3. To what extent are working mothers aware of the societal benefits associated with quality childcare?
4. What are the perspectives of working mothers regarding family-friendly workplace policies?
5. How do families perceive the importance of investing in childcare and early childhood education?

3. Background Information

Childcare is often categorized by researchers into five composite modes of care: parent and other care; relative care; nanny and babysitter care; family childcare; and center-based care (Kimmel, 2006). Alternatives for childcare is crucial in female participation in the society especially in the workforce. The employment of females particularly mothers with young children is low in most countries (Haan & Wrohlich, 2011). Participation of mothers in the work force most often depends on the availability of non-parental care which in most cases is informal care provided by relatives and non-relatives (Ackert et al., 2018). Therefore, maternal employment could be determined by the quality, affordability, and availability of childcare (Asai et al., 2015).

Little to no literature is available on recognizing the necessity or specific data such as the number, cost, and quality of childcare facilities in the Maldives. Such data is particularly important for policy makers in identifying the best approaches for encouraging women participation in the workforce (Vuri, 2016). Many countries have introduced family policies such as subsidized childcare and free access to formal pre-school in efforts to promote maternal labor force participation (Vuri, 2016). However, even in countries where the childcare market is regulated and heavily subsidized, the supply often falls short of the demand (Asai et al., 2015).

Investing in childcare delivers various benefits to society such as increased employment and improved access to labour markets for working women and other long-term social and economic benefits evident from various studies in a growing number of countries (Goudriaan, n.d.). Growing dependence of working parents on formal and informal childcare is drawing more attention to the importance of childcare arrangements and the effects of it on female workforce participation and child development outcomes (Boca, 2015).

The purpose of this literature review is to understand key themes related to access to childcare, the gender employment and wage gap, and the benefits of quality childcare, and provide insight into childcare needs of working mothers in general and in the Maldives.

3.1 Access to Quality Childcare

Access to quality childcare is a pervasive challenge for many families, with repercussions extending beyond the immediate concerns of parents. Cassells et al. (2019) highlight the limited availability of options, safety and security concerns, affordability issues, and the inflexibility of workplaces as major impediments. Felfe and Lalive (2018) emphasize the impact of these challenges on low-income households, where the struggle to find adequate childcare often results in compromised child development and hindered long-term success.

The complexity of the issue is underscored by Gelbach (2016), who notes that the lack of affordable and high-quality childcare can perpetuate socio-economic disparities, limiting opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, addressing childcare challenges becomes pivotal in creating a more equitable society, where every child has access to the resources necessary for their optimal development.

Variables:

- a. Limited Availability
- b. Safety and Security Concerns
- c. Affordability
- d. Workplace Inflexibility

The complexity of these variables underscores the intricate nature of the childcare challenge, with each element contributing to the overall difficulty faced by working mothers in accessing suitable and affordable childcare services. (Berlinski et al., 2021) emphasize the scarcity of quality childcare options as a key variable, affecting families' ability to access suitable services. The safety of childcare facilities is identified as a crucial variable impacting parental decisions (Berlinski et al., 2021) (Felfe & Lalive, 2018) highlight the financial aspect as a critical variable, with affordability influencing families' choices and access to quality care. The inflexibility of workplaces regarding childcare arrangements emerges as a significant variable affecting parents' ability to balance work and caregiving responsibilities (Berlinski et al., 2021).

3.2 Gender Employment and Wage Gap

The gender employment and wage gap are exacerbated by the caregiving responsibilities shouldered by mothers. (Blau & Kahn, 2017) argue that mothers often face professional setbacks due to the challenges of balancing work and childcare responsibilities. This struggle is further accentuated by (Del Boca et al., 2020), who note that mothers, as primary caregivers, may opt for reduced working hours or exit the workforce altogether, resulting in financial hardships for their families.

The gender employment and wage gap contribute to broader socio-economic implications, affecting the overall prosperity of families and society. In the Maldives, unemployment rate of females is higher than their male counterparts especially of reproductive age despite their level of education (FAO, 2023). On average, Maldivian women spend around 6 hours a day doing unpaid household work including childcare (FAO, 2023). Employment prospects for women in high earning sectors such as tourism is significantly reduced due to social stigma and the lack of childcare arrangements (El-Horr & Pande, 2016). Therefore, changing societal norms, providing more supportive and flexible employment arrangements and reliable childcare facilities are some of the factors that would enable women to lead a productive public life (Nowotny, 2019)

Addressing these disparities is critical not only for gender equity but also for fostering a more inclusive and just society. The "Childcare for Tomorrow" campaign in Male', Maldives, recognizes the interconnection between childcare challenges and gender inequalities and aims to advocate for changes that promote a more balanced and equitable work environment.

Variables:

- a. Caregiving Responsibilities
- b. Reduced Working Hours
- c. Exit from Workforce

These variables highlight the complex interplay between caregiving responsibilities, employment decisions, and the resulting economic disparities experienced by mothers. (Blau & Kahn, 2017) identify the variable of caregiving responsibilities as a central factor contributing to the gender employment and wage gap. Mothers often opt for reduced working hours due to caregiving responsibilities, becoming a variable that directly impacts their earning potential (Del Boca et al., 2020). Mothers exiting the workforce altogether due to the challenges of balancing work and caregiving introduce another variable affecting their long-term financial well-being (Del Boca et al., 2020).

3.3 Benefits of Quality Childcare

Quality childcare has far-reaching benefits, positively impacting economic growth, workforce participation, and the reduction of the gender wage gap. (Gelbach, 2016) emphasizes the potential of quality childcare to enhance economic productivity and contribute to a more prosperous society. Increased workforce participation, particularly by mothers, can lead to improved earning potential and reduced gender wage disparities (Del Boca et al., 2020). Furthermore, Felfe and Lalive (2018) stress the significance of early childhood education in conjunction with quality childcare. Investing in these areas not only promotes child development but also addresses societal stigmas associated with childcare. The "Childcare for Tomorrow" campaign aligns with these principles, aiming to encourage families to view childcare as an essential investment in the long-term health, development, and growth of their children.

Variables:

- a. Economic Productivity
- b. Reduction in Gender Wage Gap

These variables demonstrate the broader societal benefits associated with investing in quality childcare, extending beyond individual families to impact economic and gender equity at a societal level. (Gelbach, 2016) underscores the variable of economic productivity, emphasizing how quality childcare positively correlates with increased economic growth and workforce participation. Quality childcare is identified as a variable contributing to the reduction of the gender wage gap, as increased workforce participation by mothers positively impacts overall wage equality (Del Boca et al., 2020).

4. Survey methodology

This research adopts observational design and a mix of methods (quantitative and qualitative) for different aspects and variables.

The primary target of this study is working mothers in Male' with at least one child aged 0-6 years.

The primary data for the survey was collected using a survey instrument developed to the Maldivian setting. These are self-administered Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) questionnaires will be administered via online mediums like KoboToolBox (KoBoToolbox, 2021). Appendix 1 is the draft survey instrument.

Structured Survey:

- A structured questionnaire was developed, focusing on challenges faced, awareness levels, and perspectives on family-friendly policies.
- Likert scales used for quantifiable responses.
- Questions covered aspects such as childcare affordability, safety concerns, and the impact on professional and family life.

At the end of data collection period, 162 mothers have completed the survey form.

Interview was carried out for those engaged in tourism, fisheries, construction industry and government counterparts. A snowballing technique was used to identify experts involved in social and community support in the Maldives

Key Informant Interviews (KII):

- KIIs was conducted with a diverse group of working mothers who uses services and not, service providers and policy makers to gain qualitative insights into their experiences and perceptions.
- Topics covered include challenges in accessing childcare, societal attitudes towards working mothers, and the perceived impact of quality childcare on child development and family dynamics.
- KIIs allowed for a more in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences

A total of 4 KII interviews was completed during the survey roll out period.

The finding of this study will focus of the answers given by these 162 mothers with the incorporate of key informant interview in a separate section.

4. Findings from the Quantitative survey

This section highlights the key findings from the study.

4.1 Demographic profiling of respondents:

4.1.1 More working mothers within the age group 30-39 years participated in the survey:

A total 162 working mothers participated in the study. Women within the age band of 30-39 years mostly responded to the survey. Majority of the women who participated in the survey are married while 17 respondents are divorced.

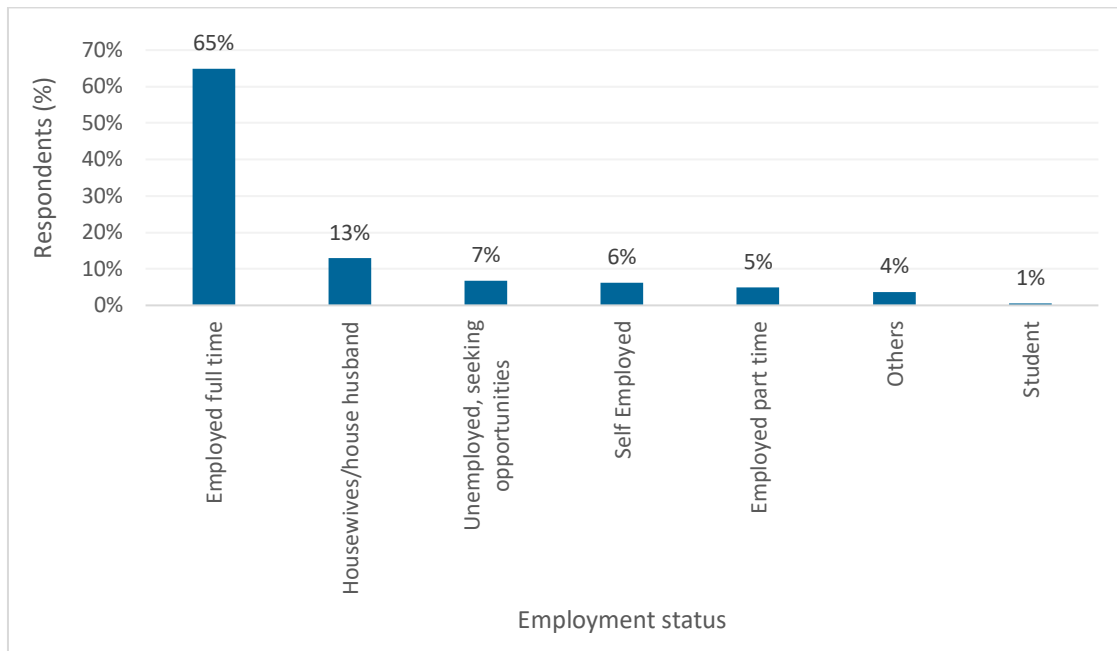
Working mothers who participated in the survey are mostly with degree and above qualification while some are with diploma and O'level passes.

Table 4.1: Key demographic indicators

Indicator	Age Group				Total
	23-29	30-39	40-49	50+	
Total women	28	111	21	2	162
Marital status					
Single	0	5	0	0	5
Married	26	93	18	1	138
Divorced	2	13	2	0	17
Widowed	0	0	1	1	2
Total	28	111	21	2	162
Educational qualification					
Primary	0	2	0	1	3
O'level	5	11	1	0	17
A'level	1	4	0	0	5
Certificate level	1	7	1	0	9
Diploma	3	16	4	0	23
Degree & above	18	71	15	1	105
Total	28	111	21	2	162

Women of different employment status participated in the survey. Majority of the respondents are employed full time while 13% of the respondents are primarily engaged in household chores. 7% of the respondents were unemployed and seeking employment opportunities and 6% of the working mothers are self-employed.

Figure 4.1: Employment status of working mothers



4.2 Access to quality childcare

Access to quality childcare is a pervasive challenge for many families, with repercussions extending beyond the immediate concerns of parents. Therefore, addressing childcare challenges becomes pivotal in creating a more equitable society, where every child has access to the resources necessary for their optimal development.

4.2.1 Working mothers mainly depend on their family and friends to take care of their children:

One in every 3 respondents rely on their family to take care of their children while they attend to work. Family and friends are the main choice of child care for working mothers under the age of 39 years. For elderly women they prefer to be stay at home mothers. Only 9% of the working mothers used day care center to care for their children while they are at work.

Working mothers who are employed full time rely significantly on the support of family or friends, highlighting the substantial care burden shouldered by these individuals to enable women's participation in the workforce. Women who are employed part-time are able to balance work and childcare responsibilities, with 38% managing both at the same time. 25% of those who are employed as part time are able to work due to hired caretaker.

Table 4.2: Child care arrangement and employment status

Employment status	Day care center	Family/Friend	Hired caretaker	Stay at home parent	Other
Self Employed	0%	20%	0%	80%	0%
Employed full time	12%	55%	15%	6%	11%
Employed part time	13%	0%	25%	38%	25%
Unemployed, seeking opportunities	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%
Student	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Housewives/house husband	0%	5%	0%	95%	0%
Others	0%	33%	0%	33%	33%

4.2.2 Close half of the respondents were satisfied with current childcare arrangement:

Nearly half of the women surveyed expressed satisfaction with their current childcare arrangements, indicating that a significant portion are discontent with the arrangements they have in place for them to care for their children while at work. Among these, women in full-time employment are the least content, with only 49% reporting satisfaction even when child care is provided by family members, in contrast to self-employed individuals (56%) and part-time employees (63%). This requires further exploration into cause and effect of this.

Table 4.3: Mean satisfaction score on current childcare arrangement by employment status

Employment status	Mean score (out of 5)
Self Employed	2.8
Employed full time	2.4
Employed part time	3.1
Unemployed, seeking opportunities	2.9
Student	1.0
Housewives/house husband	2.0
Others	2.7
Total	2.5

The satisfaction level with childcare arrangement is notably lowest among women aged 30-39 years, with a mean score of 2.4 (out of 5). There is a discernible upward trend in satisfaction levels with childcare arrangements corresponding to increasing age among women.

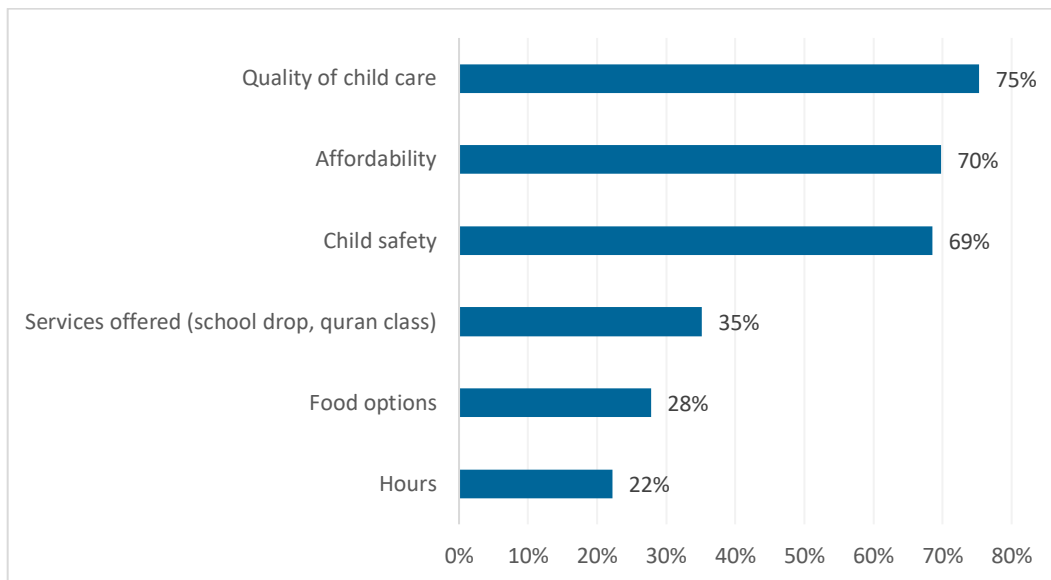
4.2.3 Community lacks adequate child care options

More than 91% of the respondents agree that there are no sufficient childcare options in the community. The provision of such service for working mothers would undeniably alleviate the reliance on family support, facilitating women's participation in work with greater ease and comfort.

4.2.4 Mothers concerned over the quality of childcare:

Women encounter a myriad of challenges when seeking appropriate childcare for their children. Their main concern remains on the quality of available childcare services (75%). Subsequently, the affordability of childcare services in comparison to their income is identified as another significant concern (70%). Additionally, 69% of the women also expressed their concern regarding child safety when entrusting their children to childcare facilities.

Figure 4.2: Challenges faced by women in finding suitable child care



4.3 Gender employment and wage gap

The gender employment and wage gap contribute to broader socio-economic implications, affecting the overall prosperity of families and society. Addressing these disparities is critical not only for gender equity but also for fostering a more inclusive and just society.

4.3.1 Women spend on average 8 hours per day working:

According to survey results, the average working hours for women stand at 8 hours. Full-time employees dedicate 8.5 hours working, part-time workers spend approximately half that duration and self-employed women spend about 4 hours per day working.

This alludes to following key actions. Childcare services should accommodate working mothers' needs by offering support ranging from a minimum of 4 hours to a maximum of 9 hours, mirroring the duration women spend working.

Table 4.4: Average hours spent in work

Employment status	Average hours worked
Self Employed	4.1
Employed full time	8.5
Employed part time	5.1
Housewives/house husband	7.7
Others	7.5
Total	7.7

4.3.2 Women prefer to take paid leave or reduce working hours than take unpaid leave to take care of their children:

The most preferred option among working mothers is taking their paid leave to care for their children when faced with child care crisis. 89% of the respondents stated they have taken paid leave to take care of their children and this is mostly preferred among part-time and full-time employees.

This is followed by many working mothers opting to reduce working hours to care for their children as 76% of the women have stated this.

The least preferred option for leave among working mothers was taking unpaid leave. One in 3 respondents prefer take unpaid leave to take care of children. This suggests that many women cannot afford to sacrifice their income, even when faced with the challenge of balancing work and child care responsibilities.

Table 4 5: Percentage of working mothers who have taken different type of leave due to child care by employment status

Employment status	Taken unpaid leave to take care of children	Taken paid leave to take care of children	Opted to reduce working hours due to childcare responsibility
Self Employed	40%	50%	90%
Employed full time	32%	94%	74%
Employed part time	75%	100%	100%
Unemployed, seeking opportunities	40%	60%	80%
Housewives/house husband	17%	67%	33%
Others	33%	83%	83%
Total	35%	89%	76%

4.3.3 Working mothers need a work-life balance:

On average, a working mother spends maximum number of their time at work. While women spend 8 hours at work, they only get to spend 6 hours to sleep and as their leisure time.

This is less among women who work as full-time employees and part-time employees. However, self-employed women get more time to take care of themselves and spend less time at work.

This highlights the importance of partners sharing more responsibility with household chores to help women achieve a better work-life balance while managing their professional commitments.

Table 4 6: Average hours spent in work and in leisure time by employment status

Employment status	Average hours worked	Average hours spent on selfcare, leisure and sleep
Self Employed	4.1	7.2
Employed full time	8.5	5.4
Employed part time	5.1	5.4
Housewives/house husband	7.7	5.7
Others	7.5	6.2
Total	7.7	5.5

4.4 Awareness on the societal benefits of quality of child care:

Raising awareness about the societal benefits of quality child care is essential for promoting the well-being of children, families, and the broader community. High-quality child care provides numerous advantages, such as enhanced child developments, improved parental workforce participation, reduced inequality, and stronger communities.

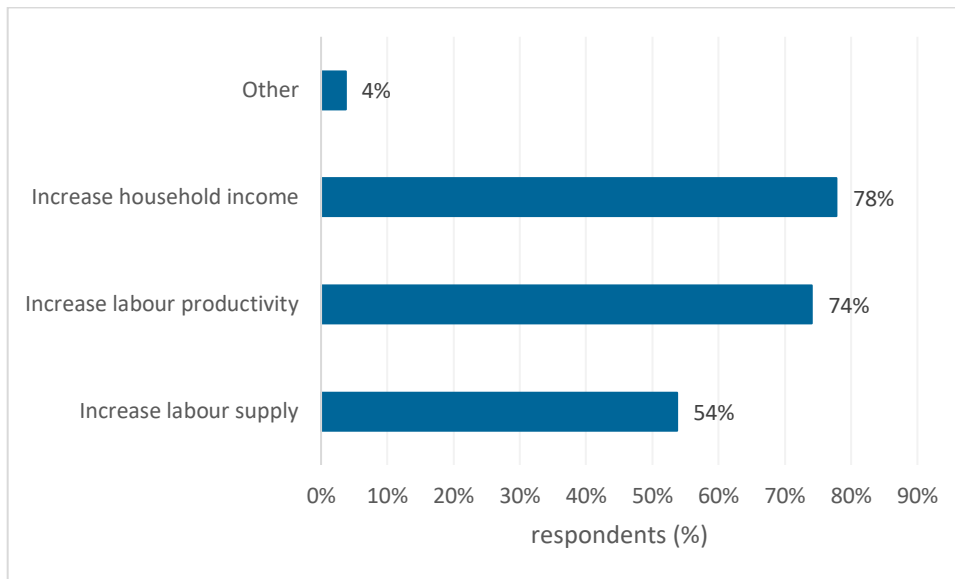
4.4.1 Most women see affordable high-quality childcare can increase household income:

When asked about the positive impact the access to affordable high-quality child care can have economic growth, than 78% respondents felt that it can increase household income. This can be viewed from both sides, as it frees the time household members spend in child care which can be dedicated for an income generating activity. The findings point that affordable high-quality child care not only have a positive economic impact on the women but also have strong positive correlation on improving the financial condition of the household.

Similarly, more than 74% of the women also see that it can increase their labour productivity if they have access to affordable high-quality child care services.

These findings allude that much economic gain can be attained by women if they have provision to quality child care facilities.

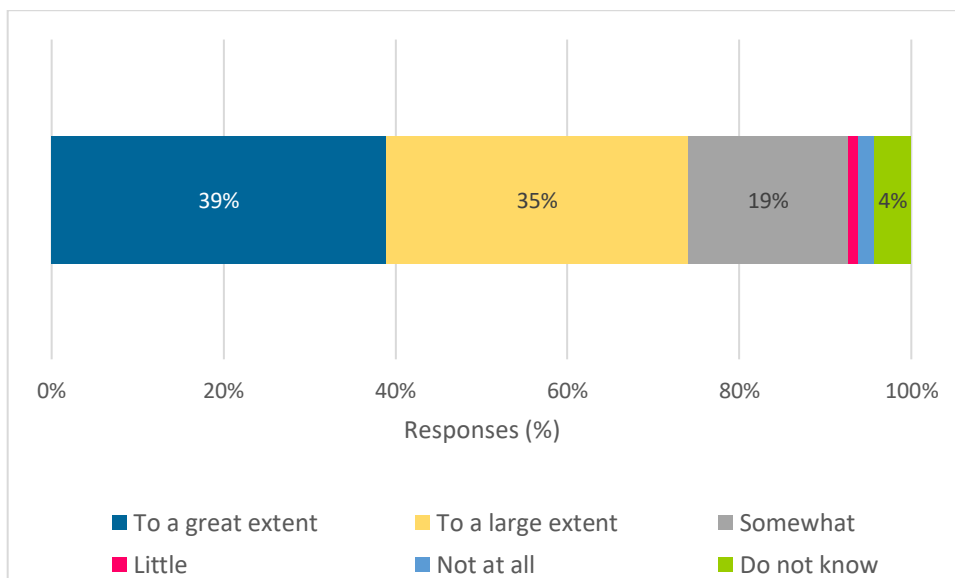
Figure 4 3: Type of economic growth and productivity due to the impact of affordable high-quality child care



4.4.2 More than three-fourth of the women see quality child care can reduce gender wage gap:

Over 74% of women believe that access to quality child care can help reduce the gender wage gap. Specifically, 39% of women think it can significantly narrow the gap, while 35% feel it would have a substantial impact. Additionally, 19% of women see a moderate association between quality child care and the reduction of the gender wage gap.

Figure 2 1: Extent to which quality child care can reduce gender wage gap



4.4.3 Working mothers have a positive impact on the society:

More half of the working mothers perceive they have a positive impact on the society. About 29% of the women feel they neither contribute a positive or a negative impact on the society.

4.5 Workplace policies

4.5.1 Employers are most likely to offer flexible working hour policy than any other type of childcare benefits

About 42% of the women stated that employers are most likely to offer childcare arrangement as means of flexible working hour than providing any other childcare benefits. It is common practice for employer to provide flexy working hours for those working in the sales industry.

More than one third of the respondents also stated that employers include children as a qualifier for leave in their sick leave policy. This is most commonly offered by employers for women working in education and service sector.

This emphases on the stress working mothers carry while attending to their children even when they are sick, etc.

Table 4 7: Different type of leave policies offered by employer by sector of employment

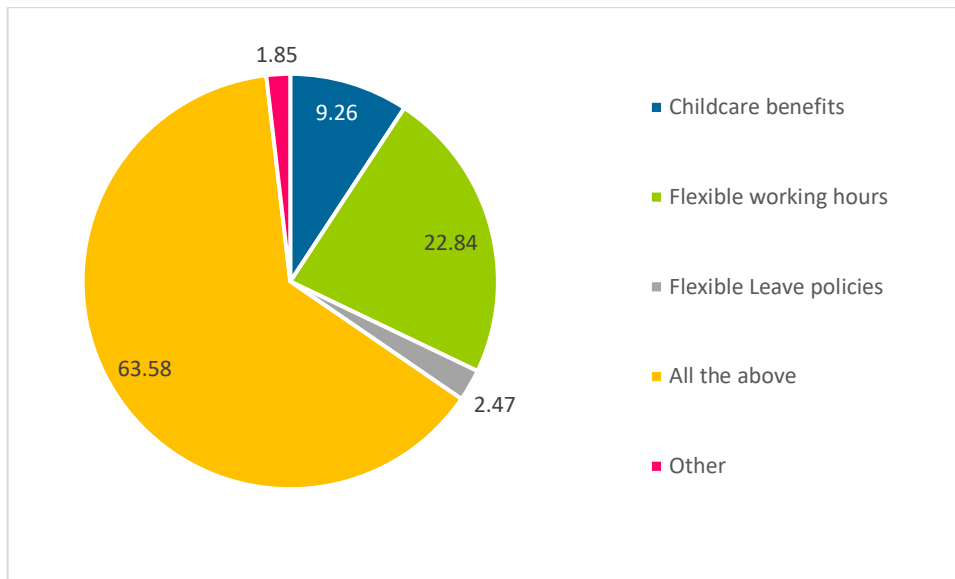
Employment sector	Employer offers childcare benefits	Employer offers flexible working hour policy	Employer include children as qualifying individuals in the sick leave policy	Employer have an infant at work policy
Hospitality	10%	18%	27%	0%
Healthcare	14%	47%	37%	3%
Education	13%	40%	50%	10%
Fisheries	0%	0%	0%	0%
Farming & Agriculture	0%	0%	0%	0%
Retail	40%	29%	29%	14%
Sales	17%	83%	50%	0%
Civil service	14%	43%	35%	13%
Other	9%	42%	39%	11%
Total	13%	42%	37%	8%

4.5.2 Lack of family-friendly workplace policy hinders mothers from staying or entering the workforce

The findings reveal that the absence of family-friendly workplace policies hinders women from entering or remaining in the workforce. Policies such as child care benefits, flexible working hours, and adaptable leave arrangements are either insufficient or restrictive, limiting opportunities for mothers to join or stay in the workforce.

Introducing or improving these policies could significantly facilitate the integration of women into the workforce.

Figure 4 4: Policies lacking by type that hinders mothers from staying in or entering the workforce

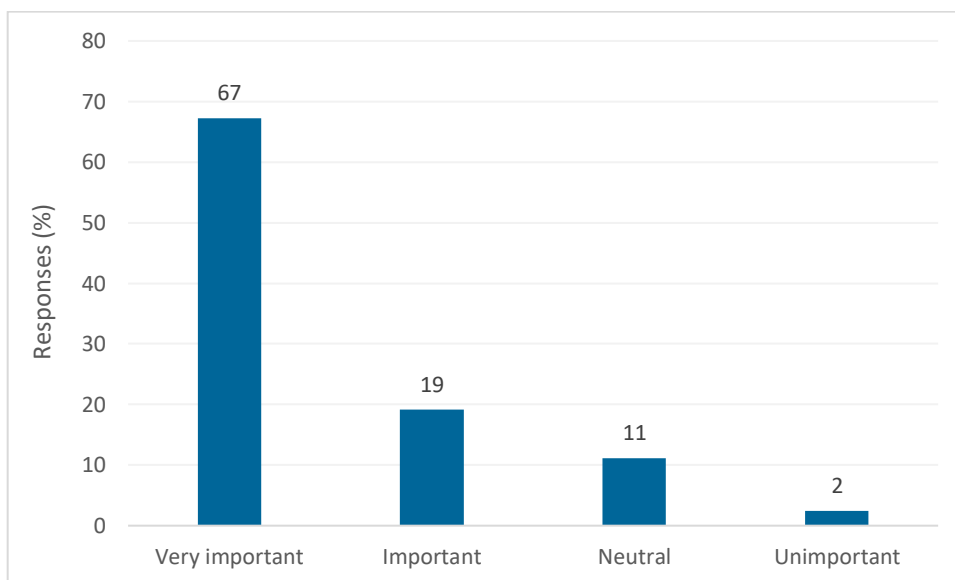


4.6 Family attitudes towards childcare

4.6.1 Family sees the importance of investing in childcare and early childhood education

The survey findings show that over 86% of respondents agree that their families prioritize investing in child care and early childhood education. Meanwhile, around 11% of women reported that their families held a neutral attitude toward such investments.

Figure 4.5: How does you family rate the importance of investing in childcare and early childhood education?



4.6.2 Women face societal stigma in using childcare services but this does not affect their decision-making in seeking child care services

Close to 83% of the women agreed that there are societal stigmas associated with working mothers using childcare services. This is mostly among those working in farming, fishing and retail sector. These sectors are commonly known as home-based activities for women and women seeking childcare services to work at home in this industry have to face with societal stigmas than those working in other industries.

Even though seeking childcare services have to face societal stigmas, this does not affect their decision in seeking childcare services. Hence, even with societal stigma women are left with no choice but to seek childcare support when the need arises. This would be a common practice among women working sales sector.

Table 4 8: Societal stigma associated with working mothers in using childcare services

Employment sector	Is there societal stigmas associated with working mothers using childcare services?	Does societal stigma affect your decision-making in seeking childcare services?
Hospitality	91%	27%
Healthcare	87%	30%
Education	60%	40%
Fisheries	100%	0%
Farming & Agriculture	100%	0%
Retail	100%	43%
Sales	83%	50%
Civil service	78%	43%
Other	82%	32%
Total	83%	34%

5. Findings from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Qualitative discussions were also carried out as Key Informant Interviews to gather more insight into issues which cannot be fully addressed through the online survey. Summary of all four interviews carried is as follows:

Compensated users³ find childcare integrated into the school system being ideal for working parents, especially if it aligns with working hours. As stated by one of the members ‘I work in public sector and receive childcare benefits, which makes things easier for me. However, the biggest challenge during working hours is managing school drop-offs and pick-ups. Even though Malé is a small place, the traffic during rush hours makes this task time-consuming and difficult. Since my childcare is subsidized, it's not a financial burden for me, but I can imagine it being quite

³ Employees who receive MVR 4000 monthly as childcare benefits

challenging for parents who don't receive such benefits. Childcare is expensive, and it adds to other costs like school fees, rent, and bills.

While affluent families can afford maids or nannies to assist with child care, the high cost of formal child care is likely the main reason some parents do not pursue it, despite being aware of its benefits. Participants agreed that most people prefer reputable centres that provide high-quality care, but such quality often comes with a higher price tag.

Participants observed that public sector workplaces are often more family-friendly, not only due to financial support for child care but also because they offer greater flexibility. It is generally easier to take leave to care for children in the public sector compared to the private sector. However, this flexibility varies depending on the position and nature of the job, with junior staff typically receiving less flexibility than senior officials, despite all parents facing similar challenges.

As stated by one of the participants 'for me and others in my circle, using childcare is an everyday thing, and my family is very open to it. I think the community's views on childcare are changing, and more people recognize the benefits of having access to high-quality childcare'.

Many social issues, such as crime, can be linked to poor upbringing or neglect, often stemming from parents struggling to balance work and family life. Untrained nannies may not be able to provide the proper care needed for a child's development. As one participant expressed, "I'm very satisfied with the child care services I use, but with average incomes ranging from \$1,000 to \$1,500, how can people afford these services, especially with the rising cost of living?"

Parents often visit child care facilities before enrolling their children, basing their decision on factors such as the caregiver-to-child ratio. As one participant noted, "*It's important to me that my child receives full attention.*" While small child care businesses provide an essential service and could benefit from support, participants were unsure whether the government should subsidize these providers. Instead, they suggested that the government could assist by ensuring quality control and regulating the industry to maintain high standards.

Participants also noted that childcare is only available in Male while this service is not established in other islands. The only hindrance for this is the affordability.

Compensated non-users: the number of formal childcare centres are limited particularly on smaller islands which forces parents to rely on informal caregivers such family members.

The absence of standardized regulations and monitoring of child care centers in the Maldives raises concerns about the quality and safety of these services, making it difficult for parents to fully trust the care provided. Many childcare providers are noticed to lack formal training in early childhood education or care, which create concern when prioritizing child's cognitive and emotional development.

In Malé, where demand for child care centers is significantly high, there is a long waiting list for quality service providers. This creates frustration for working parents who require immediate access to child care services.

There is cultural norm within the community that grandparents should take care of the young ones. This can sometimes create tension within families when parents choose to use formal child care services, as extended family members may feel that this decision undermines traditional family roles.

The operating hours of child care centers often do not align with regular working hours. Some daycare centers, for instance, only open at 3 p.m., which is after most parents' workday.

Additionally, many providers offer care for only 3-4 hours, creating challenges for parents who then need to arrange alternative care for their children after daycare ends.

There is a lack of awareness about the benefits of early childhood care and education, even in Malé. This is also prevalent in the islands, where traditional family structures are often relied upon for child care. Many families may not fully recognize the developmental and social advantages of formal child care services, as the cultural norm has long been to have relatives care for children at home. This is further compounded by the limited availability of quality child care services in the islands.

Participants noted that while employers may provide child care allowances, having an on-site child care facility within the organization would be even more beneficial. An on-site center would offer greater convenience and reduce the stress of travel time. It would also create a more supportive environment for working parents, helping them better balance work and family responsibilities. Additional helpful policies include flexible working hours, parental leave for both mothers and fathers, and the option to work from home when needed.

In the Maldives, some social stigma still exists around working mothers using child care services, particularly in more conservative communities. Traditionally, women are expected to stay at home with their children, and using child care services is sometimes viewed as not fulfilling their maternal role. However, this perception is gradually shifting, especially in Malé and among more educated families, who understand that both parents often need to work for financial stability. As shared by participant 'In my own family, there is a shared understanding that child care services are essential for working parents and are seen as a practical solution rather than something to be stigmatized. Nonetheless, I have encountered opinions from older generations who believe that mothers should remain at home with their children'.

Uncompensated users⁴ also face difficulties in finding high-quality, affordable child care. Since costs are generally similar across most providers, parents tend to base their decision on factors like customer feedback, reputation, and years of experience. And in those of these cases, parents who seek childcare do so because they have not other options. Many participants noted that having child care available at the workplace would be the ideal and most preferred option for most parents.

One interview participant shared, "I decided to use a child care service after discussing it with my spouse, and we both agreed it was the best choice. However, my mother was strongly opposed, as she wanted to take on the responsibility herself." Many grandparents are more than willing to care for their grandchildren and may feel hurt or offended if they are not given that role.

The establishment of child care facilities at the workplace was seen as the optimal solution, along with adequate maternity and paternity leave, and breaks for feeding or child care. Parents of young children are often less productive due to taking multiple breaks to go home. Flexible working arrangements, such as allowing employees to work more intensively and leave earlier, would also be beneficial. Additionally, maternity and paternity leave could be split between parents, with the mother taking the first six months and the father taking the next six months.

The high cost of child care services is a significant concern for working parents. Providing financial support or child care benefits would greatly assist uncompensated parents who rely on these services.

⁴ Employees who do not receive any child benefit from the employer

Service providers highlighted that parents generally prefer Maldivians to care for their children, but it is difficult to find full-time local staff. Most providers rely on students working part-time. Even when young Maldivians join, they often do not stay long, as their families do not view child care as a respectable career. One staff member shared their parents' reaction: "Why should my daughter be stuck looking after other people's children?" This mindset makes it challenging to retain staff, leading to frequent shortages.

For every child under the age of one, a dedicated caregiver is required, which adds to the staffing challenges. As service providers, there is a preference to hire young people due to the physical demands of the job. Older employees often leave after some time because of these demands. Consequently, to address staff shortages, providers are often left with no option but to hire foreign workers and provide them with extensive training.

Many people are unaware of child care services or how to access them, and there is still social stigma associated with using such services. One provider shared an experience: "A woman once visited to inquire about our services. She even stayed to observe what we do. However, when she was ready to enrol her child, she couldn't get her husband's approval." Some parents also have trust and only wanted to bring their child with the condition their maid could accompany. This shows they are still hesitant to trust childcare providers.

Most people are not aware of the benefits of child care, so efforts are made to educate friends and family. 'We provide comprehensive care that includes age-appropriate learning activities for infants, toddlers, and young children. Additionally, we have an online app that allows parents to receive real-time updates, including photos of their children. Parents often report noticeable improvements in their child's development, and we receive overwhelmingly positive feedback, especially from those living in cramped spaces or environments that are not conducive to raising children'.

As a service provider, we are unable to engage in extensive advertising or social media outreach due to budget constraints. We also face numerous challenges, including high overhead costs such as rent, electricity, and water, which significantly influence our pricing structure. One provider mentioned, "If there were a government policy offering child care benefits to parents, it would indirectly help subsidize our operations and could potentially allow us to expand."

In addition to social stigma, there is a significant amount of misinformation surrounding child care. Many people are influenced by videos of abuse they see online, which negatively affects the reputation of child care businesses, even though these incidents typically involve nannies rather than professional child care centers. Most individuals do not understand how structured and high-quality these services can be, or how closely we monitor our staff. 'We actively encourage parents to come and observe our interactions with their children so they can witness firsthand the quality of care we provide'.

Policy Level: The government is committed to implementing affordable child care systems. This includes developing funding mechanisms to improve living standards, with a particular focus on ensuring that single parents have access to appropriate funds for child care services. Work on the new Statistical Action Plan (SAP) is underway, which aims to address these issues. Additionally, the Civil Service Commission is reviewing policies to facilitate the return of stay-at-home parents to the workforce by offering flexible working hours, work-from-home options, and other supportive measures.

Currently, there are no policy plans in place to mandate six-month maternity leave and one-month paternity leave for the private sector. However, the findings from this study could be leveraged to advocate for these changes and raise public awareness. It was also suggested that success stories

of employers who provide child care services for their employees be highlighted, demonstrating how such initiatives positively impact employee productivity, performance, and turnover rates. This could help create greater awareness and support for the need for these policies.

Further suggestion was given to refer to Ministry of Social and Family Development website to refer to progress of National Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP).

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The findings from the study highlight key challenges that women face when seeking child care services.

One in three working mothers rely on family and friends for child care support while they work. And only 9% of the women used day care centre to care for their children while at work. This signifies the lack of day care facilities, even in Male' where a significant number of women are employed. Although family and friends often provide satisfactory care for children, it is essential for these women to have a backup plan. If a family member falls ill, it can leave them in a difficult situation when trying to arrange alternative care for their child while fulfilling work obligations.

The survey also revealed that community lacks adequate child care options. The primary challenge faced by working mothers in Male' in accessing childcare remains as the quality of childcare services and affordability of these services. Women are also concerns with the safety of their child when entrusting the care to these facilities.

Women on average spend 8 hours per day at work, while full-time mothers spend more than this. At times of child care crisis, women prefer to take their paid leave rather than taking leave without pay. This indicates that they are unable to sacrifice their pay even when faced with childcare crisis. While women spend 8 hours at work, they only get 6 hours to sleep and to care for themselves. While balancing work and household responsibilities, women need support from family, emphasizing that a more responsible role can be played by the partner.

Working mothers see the societal benefits of quality child care. Most women see affordable high-quality childcare can have an economic growth and can increase household income. 74% of the women stated that it can increase their labour productivity if they have access to affordable high-quality child care. And more than 74% of the women stated that it can reduce gender wage gap. More than half of the working mothers perceive they have a positive impact on the society.

Employers are most likely to offer flexible working hours than any other type of childcare benefits. This is most common for those working in the sales industry. Sick leave is most of the time granted for those with children and considered as a qualifier for sick leave.

The absence of family-friendly workplace policies hinders women from entering or remaining in the workforce. Introducing or improving existing policies could significantly facilitate the integration of women into the workforce.

The findings also revealed that families prioritize investing in child care and early childhood education. Women face societal stigma in using childcare services but this does not affect their decision-making in seeking child care services.

The key informant discussions revealed the importance of child care service to be open till regular working hours. Most felt it is important to have on-site childcare service at the office. And child care service is mostly available in Male', with a long waiting list for quality service providers.

Cultural norm also plays a role when parent seek childcare service and grandparents feel offended by it.

Service providers face challenges in getting qualified Maldivians as care givers and it is hard to retain them. They face staffing challenges and are left with no option but to hire foreign workers.

It is important to create awareness on the benefit of child care for early childhood development. There is also misinformation surrounding child care.

To summarize, the key takeaways included:

- Key challenges that women face in accessing affordable and high-quality childcare include:
 - Limited day care facilities in Male'
 - Societal stigma in using child care
 - Affordability of childcare service
 - Quality of child care service
 - Concerns abouts the safety of their child when entrusting the care to these facilities.
- Childcare challenges that affect the work-life balance of working mothers:
 - At times of family crisis, women opt to take paid leave rather than no-pay leave showing they are unable to sacrifice their pay.
 - Working for 8 hours leaves them with limited time to care for their children. Additional tasks such as household chores, care for children leaves them with less time to have a work-life balance.
 - Accommodate flexible opening hours for child care centers
- Perspective of working mothers on family friendly workplace policies:
 - Affordable high-quality childcare is perceived to increase household income
 - Affordable high-quality childcare perceived to increase their labour productivity
 - Quality child care can reduce gender wage gap
 - It can increase women's participation in societal activities
 - Employers are most likely to offer flexible working hours than any other type of childcare benefits
 - Absence of family-friendly workplace policies hinders women from entering or remaining in the workforce.
- Family attitudes towards investing in childcare and early childhood education:
 - Family sees the importance of investing in childcare and early childhood education
 - Women face societal stigma in using childcare services
 - Address social norms associated with using childcare services within the family

6.2 Recommendations

Accessing affordable and high-quality childcare:

- To alleviate the burden on family members, it is essential for the government to facilitate child care support for working mothers. These childcare services could range from low to high quality to accommodate different range of income earners.
- The provision of child care services should ensure quality while maintaining affordable prices. It is important to recognize that working mothers come from both the public and private sectors, and pricing should be subsidized accordingly.
- Investment in human capital within the caregiving sector should be prioritized. This initiative could involve inviting women from various age groups to consider careers in caregiving.
- Safety measures in child care facilities must be implemented, along with regular monitoring. This can be achieved through collaboration between the government and civil society organizations (CSOs).
- The government should also focus on establishing daycare facilities that are easily accessible for parents to drop off their children.

Work-life balance for working mothers:

- Child care facilities should operate for extended hours, exceeding nine hours, to accommodate women working late.
- The concept of shift working hours should be introduced for those employed in child care facilities.
- Public awareness campaigns should be launched to promote the shared responsibilities that men and women can undertake in household chores and caring for family members.

Awareness on the societal benefits of quality of child care:

- Expand opportunities for family members to engage in home-based economic activities by providing skilling and reskilling programs. These opportunities can be facilitated through online training and collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs).
- Enhance government initiatives to reduce the gender pay gap by promoting access to credit facilities for women entrepreneurs.
- Strengthen government efforts to provide affordable, high-quality child care by investing in child care facilities and developing human capital in this sector.
- Offer subsidized rates for child care services and promote credit facilities for daycare centers to make them more accessible.
- Implement child care allowances across both government and private sectors to support working families.

Workplace policies:

- Encourage more private sector employers to provide sick leave for women with children.

- Advocate for private sector companies to implement six-month maternity leave for women.
- Introduce policies that facilitate the integration of women into the workforce by taking their child care responsibilities into account.

Family attitudes towards childcare:

- Raise awareness within the community about the benefits of child care for child development.
- Launch a social media campaign to combat societal stigma surrounding the use of child care services.
- Share best practices on social media from various agencies regarding the provision of child care allowances to encourage others to follow suit.

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