

POLICY BRIEF - REDUCING WOMEN'S CARE BURDEN AND IMPROVING THEIR ECONOMIC WELLBEING THROUGH ESTABLISHMENT OF COMMUNITY BASED CHILDCARE CENTERS

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Policy Brief

Reducing women's care burden and improving their economic wellbeing through establishment of community-based childcare centers



Background

Childcare limits women's time for paid work. Providing quality childcare services is therefore essential for enhancing women's labor force participation, as well as promoting Early Childhood Development (ECD) and broader child wellbeing. However, access to and quality of childcare services in Ethiopia remains a concern, particularly for children under the age of three. Free or subsidized childcare allows young children to be looked after, enabling women to shift their time-use patterns and increase their economic productivity, enabling them to engage in income-generating activities (IGAs). Under the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) – East Africa project, Child-Fund Ethiopia, Children Believe Fund, and Tesfa Berhan Child and Family Development Organization implemented a project by establishing affordable and quality community-based childcare centers. Addis Ababa University (AAU) has conducted an impact evaluation study to assess whether these community-based childcare services can indeed improve women's economic empowerment, while promoting child development and growth.

Intervention packages

The interventions include (1) establishment of community-based childcare centers; developing training packages and providing training on ECD and childcare center management for childcare center workforce; and coaching, mentoring, and supportive supervision to enhance quality of childcare centers, (2) organizing women's collective agencies – self-help groups (SHGs), and providing them with initial capital; offering capacity building trainings on entrepreneurship, business and financial management skills; conducting monitoring and supportive supervisions; and establishing SHGs network, and (3) local and national social and behavioral change communication and advocacy engagements with community and government stakeholders.

Methods

The project was implemented in three urban settings – Addis Ababa, Adama, and Debre Birhan – between October 2022 and June 2024. Women who were unemployed or had irregular employment mainly due to childcare during project start, along with their 12–36 months old children, were the study population. Quantitative data was collected at baseline (from 622 women-child pair) and endline (from 543 mother-child pairs) from both intervention and control groups. A quasi-experimental design was used to assign study subjects and difference-in-differences (DID) analysis was performed to estimate the impact of the GrOW Ethiopia interventions. Key informants' interviews were also conducted with stakeholders to gain valuable insights into childcare practices, explore barriers and enablers of the community-based childcare, and triangulate quantitative findings. The study received ethical clearance from AAU College of Health Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Key findings

The interventions increased women's current employment by 19 percentage points (pps) (a 31% increase over the endline control group), business ownership (self-employment) by 39 pps (a 138% increase), personal savings by 38 pps (a 118% increase), household wealth by 24 pps (a 47% increase), and monthly earnings by 1,198 Birr (a 67% increase) (Figure 1). The findings are supported by qualitative data as well. For example, a mother from Debre Birhan described the employment opportunity as “...the availability of childcare center provides me with opportunity and time to work while my child is at the childcare center.” Another mother from Adama described about the savings saying, “Alhamdulillah! I have benefited from the savings in SHG. I took loan and invested it in my businesses.”

The findings are also corroborated with other studies, demonstrating that providing free or subsidized childcare services boosts women's employment, increases income, and thereby enhances savings.

Key findings ...

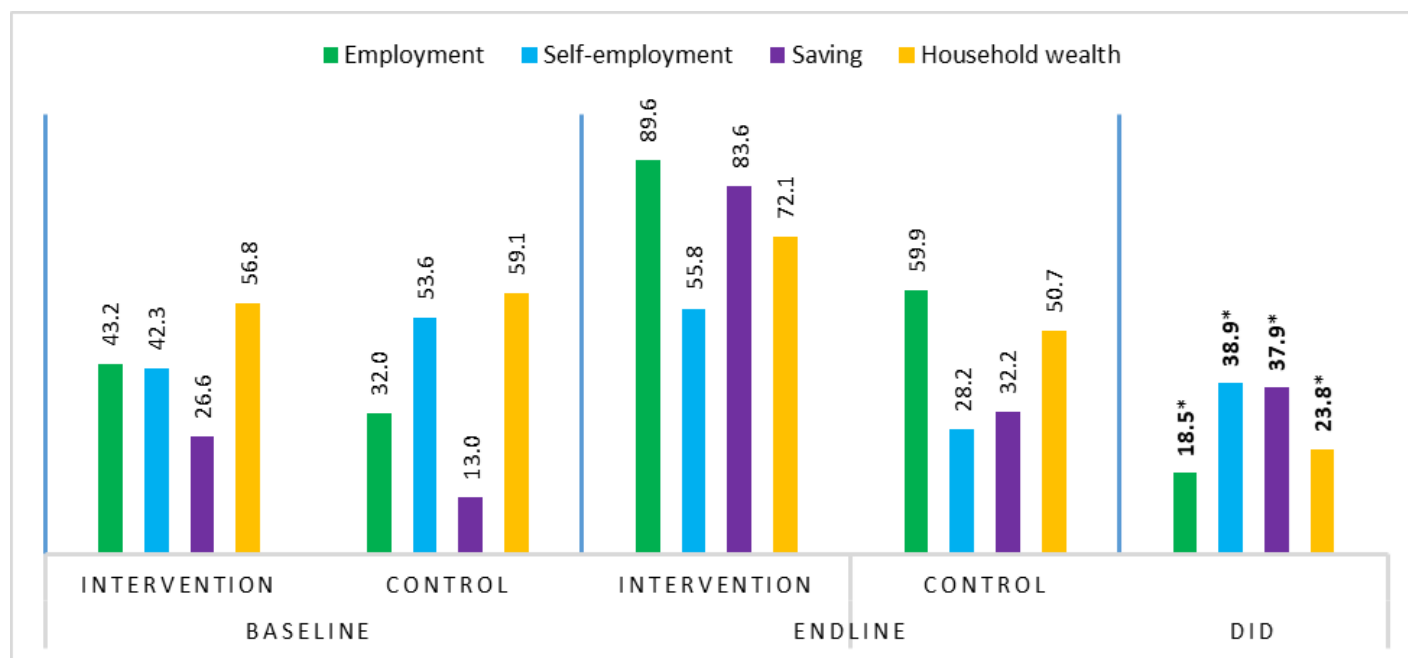


Figure 1: Women's employment, earnings, saving and household wealth at baseline and endline, disaggregated by intervention and control groups, GrOW Ethiopia Survey 2022–2024.

The interventions also helped reduce household food insecurity by 16 pps (a 17.8% decrease over endline control), decreased depression score by 1.6 points, a 22.8% reduction, and increased fathers' involvement in childcare activities by 14 pps, a 23% increase (Figure 2). As women's income rises, they mainly allocate it to household consumption and acquisition of household assets. The reduced financial related anxiety and reliance on others for money due to increased income and having more time enabled women to participate in social activities and find peace of mind. A mother from Addis Ababa described how the intervention improved her situation by saying, *"Before, it was difficult for me to afford an onion and tomato, and I couldn't meet my son's needs. But now, I can. Thank you."* The same mother expressed her relief, saying *"...the big thing is I have peace of mind knowing that my child is in a good and clean place. The second thing I can go to work, and I believe that I even have peace with my family."*

However, the interventions did not significantly impact women's decision-making power, intimate partner violence, child nutrition, or ECD. The null findings of our study can be explained by the multisectoral and multi-dimensional nature of the issues, which require holistic interventions.

Financial constraints, lack of collaboration and commitment among sectors, and overambitious project planning and execution were identified as main challenges for community-based childcare service provision. On the other hand, government attentions to the sector, support from stakeholders including NGOs, religious institutions, and individuals, as well as improved awareness among communities and government officials, are facilitators for establishing community-based childcare centers.

Key findings ...

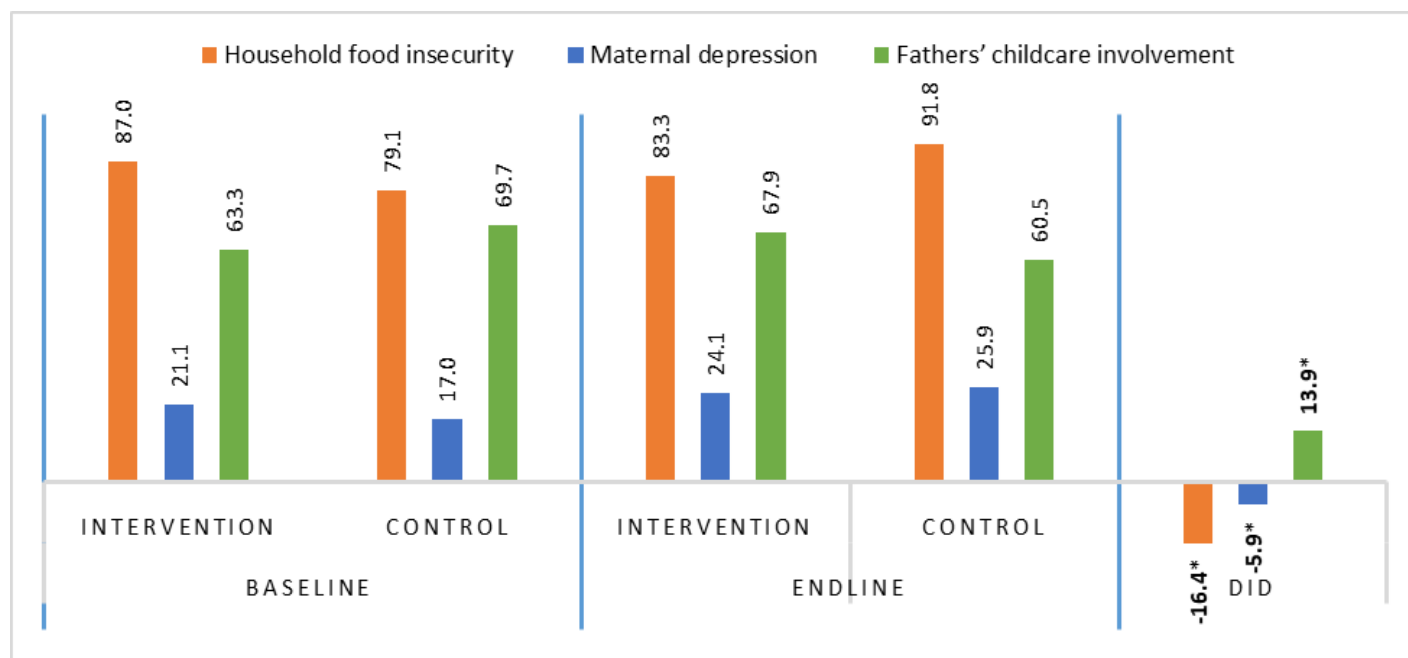


Figure 2: Food insecurity, maternal depression, and fathers' involvement in childcare at baseline and endline, disaggregated by intervention and control groups, GrOW Ethiopia Survey 2022–2024.

Recommendations

To reduce the caregiving burden on women and enhance their economic wellbeing, while promoting ECD through affordable and quality community-based childcare services, the study recommends the following:

Reinforce policy linkages between women's economic empowerment and ECD. Our study generated evidence towards the revision of policies, particularly the Ethiopia's National Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) policy to incorporate women's economic empowerment as a strategy to enhance household income, and improve access to ECD services.

Ensure sustainability. The project has contributed to employment and income, thereby enhancing food security and improving health. However, such interventions

primarily project-based and short-lived, often phase out without proper transition to government and/or community institutions, leading to uncertainty. Based on the learnings from this project, it has been noted that linking SHG networks (groups of SHGs) with concerned stakeholders and strengthening both the networks and the SHGs through capacity building, financial inclusions, diversified livelihoods, and integrating their activities with government development initiatives, such as urban agriculture, can make the SHGs and childcare centers more resilient and sustainable. This will also encourage community ownership of the SHGs, and plug childcare centers within the community, providing a strong mechanism to enhance access and quality of childcare centers.

Focused intervention targeting male partners. The interventions did not enhance women's decision-

Recommendations ...

making or reduce intimate partner violence significantly, although they contributed positively to fathers' involvement in childcare. Future interventions should target male partners through targeted social and behavioral change communication interventions.

Scale-up or replicate the community-based childcare model to enhance women's economic empowerment. The model successfully achieved one of its

primary goals by creating employment and income opportunities for mothers, who would otherwise spend their time solely on childcare. Scaling up or replicating the community-based childcare model in a coordinated manner, with longer project duration, would enhance sustainability and community ownership, leading to greater impacts on the wellbeing of children, mothers, and families.



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For more information about the GrOW Ethiopia project on women's economic empowerment and ECD, contact: ChildFund Ethiopia; <https://www.childfund.org/ethiopia/>