

Enhancing Women's Livelihoods, Labor Force Participation, Psychosocial Wellbeing, and Child Development through the Crèche Programme in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya: Findings from a Pilot Study

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Abstract

Childcare has been recognized worldwide as a barrier to women's engagement in productive economic activities both within the home and in paid up work. Parents attach great value to childcare, an integral input into child development and well-being. In Africa, although both parents should be involved in childcare, patriarchy, which dictates gender power dynamics place the bulk of childcare in the hands of women and girls. In Kenya, formal schooling starts at age four, a situation that confines women at home taking care of children and carrying out other domestic work. This situation militates against their full participation in the labor market, hence the need for crèches. This pilot study evaluated the impact of crèches in Tharaka Nithi County on child development, women's livelihoods, female labor force participation and women's psycho-social well-being. It also analyzed the determinants of crèche usage and female labor force participation; and the amount of time women spend on childcare and home production. The study aimed at influencing policy and practice in Tharaka Nithi County on the subject with an anticipated scale up. Data was collected through a mixed method approach. Preliminary key findings indicate that lack of formalized childcare significantly reduces the ability of women to participate in labor markets; reduces mothers' self-reported psycho-social well-being; and is positively correlated with children's health. Women's livelihoods in Tharaka Nithi County differ significantly across agro-ecological zones. Therefore, policies for improving women's economic empowerment ought to take into account geographic, socio-demographics, and levels of social infrastructure, including the types of crèches available.

Key Words: Women's Livelihoods, Female Labor Force Participation, Psycho-social Well-being, Child Development, Crèches, Women's Economic Empowerment, Gender.

INTRODUCTION

Women play a major role in household chores and childcare activities. They continue to bear disproportionately larger shares of family responsibilities despite their growing participation in paid work (Hazel & Kleyman, 2020). The distribution of unpaid work at home has largely

remained rigid, with little gendered renegotiation on how this inequality can change (Hazel et al., 2020). Balancing paid caregiving work with the household responsibilities imposed upon women and girls has resulted in double burden.

Childcare has largely been recognized as a barrier to women engagement in productive economic activities outside the home. UN Women (2020); Jabeen et al. (2020); Ferrant and Thim (2019) show that on average, women spend more than three times as much time as men on unpaid caregiving and domestic work. In Kenya, the burden of unpaid childcare is aggravated by the government directive where children below four years of age are not allowed to go to school and therefore, must be cared for at home (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008). The direct consequence of this directive is that mothers are confined within the home taking care of children thus, reducing their time to participate in income earning activities.

It is recognized that women as care givers need the highest levels of health standards and wellbeing for emotional stability (United Nations, 2015). The competition of caregiving, gender roles and social economic activities places undue pressure on women thus affecting their physical, psychological, spiritual and emotional wellbeing (Richardson et al., 2018). The childcare burden correlates with negative outcomes for both the care giver and the child (Kachingwe et al., 2021). The socio-cultural context in which childcare occurs needs to be taken into account if interventions targeted at reducing childcare burdens are to have positive effects on women wellbeing (Schultz & Eden, 2016; Roeters & Gracia, 2016; Nandi et al., 2016).

Tharaka Nithi County Government has initiated women-specific projects and programmes with a view to empowering them economically. Examples of such programmes include the crèche at Chuka Open Air Market located in Chuka Town, which is the largest town in the County. The crèche programme in Chuka is not anchored on any legal framework. A legal framework is a key determinant to the success of any government supported programmes, projects and policies. This study provides evidence that can be used by the county government to formulate childcare policies and legal frameworks and thus facilitate implementation of child care centers throughout the County.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite being taken for granted due to its invisible nature, unpaid work is now increasingly gaining recognition in mainstream economic policy debates as an impediment to the overall economic growth and to women's economic empowerment (Cantillon & Teasdale, 2021). The increasing recognition of unpaid childcare and its negative impact on women and children has made many countries across the world to adopt childcare programs and policies as strategies for reducing the burden of unpaid childcare on women (Cascio et al., 2015).

Tharaka Nithi County Government established a crèche at Chuka Market in 2018 and launched it in 2020. This was based on the realization that many children were suffering because of inadequate childcare. It is expected that the childcare program will improve the psycho-social well-being of lactating mothers as well as the growth and development of the children.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The study sought to:

- i. Assess the impact of the crèche programme on women's livelihoods, female labor force participation, psychosocial wellbeing and child development
- ii. Analyze the determinants of the crèche usage and female labor force participation.
- iii. Quantify the time spent on childcare and home production and its impact on women economic empowerment
- iv. Demonstrate the effects of institutionalizing and scaling up crèches on women's economic empowerment and child development.

JUSTIFICATION

Little information exists on the relationship between female labor market work and home production in Kenya. This information is needed because market work has implications for home production by women, particularly the production of childcare by mothers. Moreover, home production can adversely affect women's careers and market incomes, which are necessarily pursued outside the home. To design public policies that promote both home production and women's economic empowerment, empirical information is needed on a unified labor force participation framework. Particularly regarding females, such a model is unified in the sense that it takes into account the market and non-market settings in which women in Kenya and other African countries operate. There is need to note that the new social context heralded by the Covid-19 cannot be ignored in Kenya or any other African country in an in-depth analysis of female labor force participation, because the pandemic and the measures used to contain it, hard hit the informal sector, the main source of livelihoods for the majority of women.

The aim of the study is to provide rigorous observational as well experimental evidence that can be used to design and implement policies that would work for women's economic empowerment in Kenya and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

The rapid assessment on women with children aged four years and below was conducted in various study sites across three administrative wards each representing the three agro-ecological zones of

the County. These wards were Karingani in Chuka Sub-county, Chiakariga in Tharaka South Sub-county and Gatunga in Tharaka North Sub-county. The study sites were selected purposively based on the ecological zones and livelihood activities, after which the households were selected proportionately from the identified zones.

Sampling procedure

During the stakeholders meeting held before the Rapid Needs Assessment, the lead community health volunteers (CHVs) were tasked with listing all women in their subunits and those within 1 km of primary schools with early childhood development (ECD) centres. CHVs provided a sampling frame (i.e. a complete list of households) of mothers or guardians with children under the age of four. The sample size was arrived at using power analysis. The respondents were randomly selected using random numbers generated by a computer calculator from a sampling frame of women with children under four years of age. The identified primary schools were also visited to gather observational and key informant data on the early childhood development facilities. CHVs were used as guides in tracing sampled mothers.

Data collection tools

The study used a questionnaire to collect information from women with children under age of 4 years. The second tool was a form to guide for observations of ECDE centres attached to primary schools which was also used to conduct key informant interviews with ECDE teachers.

Data collection procedure

The researcher filled the questionnaire using an online KoBoCollect application. The distribution of the respondents is shown in Figure 1. The research team accompanied by the CHVs visited the homes of the respondents and select primary schools to administer the questionnaires.

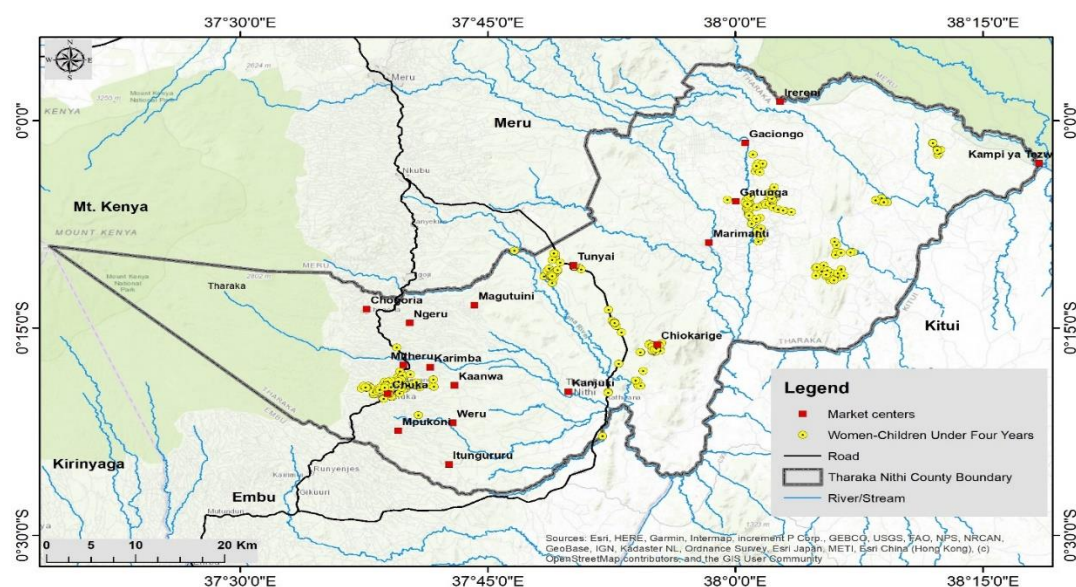


Figure 1: The geographical spread of the respondents’ households across the sample sites

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following sections provide results from the pilot study on women’s livelihoods, labour force participation, psychosocial wellbeing, child development and creche as an intervention.

Main Livelihood Activities

The main source of livelihood in most of the rural Africa is subsistence agriculture mostly done by women. Hardly do women engage in meaningful large-scale production, and once they do, mostly as labourers. Women also engage in small scale trade where mostly they exchange farm produce. The nature of one’s livelihood quite often determines the sources of income, which in turn defines one’s socio-economic status. Besides, a higher income for women translates into better families and their voices can be recognized (Kantor, 2003). This study sought to find out the sources of income women engage in within the study area. Majority of women in Gatunga (87.4%) and Muthambi (74.1%) wards engage in crop farming as their main source of livelihood. In Muthambi Ward, the second highest source of livelihood is casual labour at 9.1%. Animal husbandry was the second highest source of livelihood in Gatunga Ward at 3.8%. The mean average monthly household income for the two wards was KES. 8550.

Table 1: Livelihood Activities

Livelihood type	Gatunga (%)	Muthambi %	Total
Crop farming	160 (87.4%)	146 (74.1%)	306 (80.5%)
Casual labour	6 (3.3%)	18 (9.1%)	24 (6.3%)
Animal Husbandry	7 (3.8%)	14 (7.1%)	21 (5.5%)
Business (entrepreneurship)	2 (1.1%)	11 (5.6%)	13 (3.4%)
Other activities (mixed)	8 (4.4%)	8 (4.1%)	16 (4.2%)
Total	183 (100%)	197 (100%)	380 (100.0)

Mothers Using the Daycare Services

The study also sought to find out whether mothers with children under four years were using daycare services. *Table 2* shows that 95.5% of respondents in the three wards were not using daycare services. A small percentage of 4.5% respondents used the daycare services mostly from private entities and family arrangements. This correlates with Park, J. (2020) findings which indicates that women especially working mothers, majorly depend on private childcare professionals because public childcare centers are unreliable. Arpino and Luppi (2020) further

posit that family members especially the grandparents play key role in offering unpaid childcare services. However, three hundred and forty-seven (97.2%) of the respondents indicated that they would use government crèche for their children below four years of age if provided. This implies that most women are keen to have their children enrolled in the government crèches.

Table 2: Mothers Using Daycare Service

		Wards		
		Chiakariga	Gatunga	Karingani
Mothers currently using daycare service for children under the age of four	Missing	3(2.7%)	0(.0%)	1(0.9%)
	No	101(93.5%)	130 (97%)	110 (95.7%)
	Yes	4 (3.7%)	4(3%)	4(3.5%)
Total		108(100%)	134(100%)	115(100%)

Time Spent by Mothers on Childcare and Household Chores

Mothers in Chiakariga and Gatunga wards spend thirteen hours on childcare while those in Karingani ward spend ten hours. In Chiakariga ward, mothers spend more hours (ten hours) in household chores than in Gatunga and Karingani who spend five hours each. Majority of these mothers revealed that they were not getting any remuneration for providing childcare services to their own children. The variations of these hours across the County correlates with the availability of livelihoods. Karingani ward is in the upper agro-ecological zone and women therefore, spend less hours on childcare and household chores than those in the lower agro-ecological zones (Chiakariga and Gatunga wards) with an intention of creating time to focus on livelihood activities.

Table 3: Time Spent in Childcare and Household Chores

Ward	Time spent on child care activities (mean in hours)	Time spent on household chores (mean in hours)
Chiakariga	13	10
Gatunga	13	5
Karingani	10	5

Determinants of Creche usage

Creche plays an important role in women economic empowerment and child development. This study sought to find out the determinants of creche usage and the findings are presented in *Table 4 below*.

Table 4: Determinants of Creche usage

Variable	dy/dx	Std. Err	. z	P > z	[95% C.I.]
Religion	.0020007	.00627	0.32	0.750	-.010282 .014284
Marital Status	.0045727	.01072	0.43	0.670	-.016433 .025579
Distance in km to ECDE center	-.0045688	.00432	-1.06	0.290	-.013035 .003898
Primary Source of Livelihood	-.0083781	.00307	-2.73	0.006	-.014389 -.002368
Employment Status	.0120068	.01255	0.96	0.339	-.012593 .036607

From *Table 4*, the primary source of livelihood was significant and all other variables were insignificant. If a mother changes her religious denomination, then the probability that she will use the crèche increases by 0.2%. When marital status of a mother changes, then the probability that she will use the crèche if provided by government increases by 0.45%. When distance to the nearest ECDE centre increases by one kilometer, the probability that the mothers will use the crèche decreases by 0.45%. If the primary source of livelihood of the mother changes, the probability that she will use the crèche if provided by the government decreases by 0.83%. If the employment status increases, the probability that women will use the crèche if provided increases by 1.2%.

Views of the Stakeholders' Engagement Concerning Creche

Qualitative data on creche was collected through stakeholders' engagement and the following were their views:

...The baby care units can positively help the young women in the society as the number of the house helps have reduced. The aged grandmothers who in most cases are left with the young children do not necessarily offer a support that will lead to better child development. The proposed childcare initiative will help both the mothers and children. The initiative will also serve as a back-up to the Tusome Initiative as the baby care unit will prepare the

children before they join the Tusome, therefore, building a strong foundation for the kids (Speaker one).

...Gatunga ward has a total of 34 primary schools and all of them have ECDE centres with two levels of classes namely Pre-Primary 1 (PP1) for 4-year-olds and Pre-Primary 1 (PP2) for 5-year-olds. The establishment of baby care unit in these schools can lay a foundation for strong entry into PP1 and then to PP2. However, this should be done in collaboration with the school heads and the ECDE teachers as they have more information about the nature of their schools and the requirement to improve performance (Speaker Two).

...Babysitting is a community problem that exists. In most cases, the child is always left with the grandmother or other family members. Another challenge experienced in the community setup is the issue of abandoned children who should also be targeted in this programme other than focusing only with the children in family units. The development and installation of a baby care unit will be solving the current problem of shortage in the house helps as almost everyone is now employed and the women find it difficult to get somebody to engage in baby care work (Speaker Three).

...The initiative solves the problem of those children who haven't attained the age of schooling, that's up to 4 years as the Ministry of Education policy requires a minimum of 4 years to join PP1. Because of the childcare need, some parents are cheating on the ages of children and bringing them to ECD leading to congestion in the ECDE centres. In most cases parents want their kids to be in school yet they haven't attained the age requirement to be enrolled in the ECDE centres (Speaker Four).

...Women should be empowered in line with the development of the childcare units. Childcare hold a critical drawback in their success. Similarly, more studies should be done so that the data obtained are representative of the challenges women face with childcare along with attending to other chores at home. It will also help society with quality ECDE Training from fully present ECDE teachers. Some ECDE teachers carry their children to school even though they are not required in class as per the age limits placed by the ministry. As a result, they are a source of disruption to other teachers and depending on the kind, it may be a source of discomfort. This challenge applies even to parents as many

cannot do their duties with full attention if they must carry along their babies (Speaker Five).

...Women play a critical role in our community and in most cases, they are affected by external and internal factors. It is women who stay back home when men go out to earn a living and/or have taken childcare as a woman’s responsibility. Many women should be involved in this programme to relive them from childcare roles. The childcare roles position them as the key players in shaping the community as in most cases they are responsible for child growth and development. When implementing the programme, a proper area selection should be done especially the areas that support the initiatives because community support will play a critical role in the success of the project (Speaker Six).

...In our society especially in rural areas, most women don’t employ house girls, to look after their children. In most occasions, the mothers have to carry them around when working and this slows down work output. Provision of creche will help solve this problem and improve work output because children will be left in the care of the units as women do other duties (Speaker Seven).

Female Labour Participation

The study further sought to determine the number of women who participate in labour force. From *Table 5* below, majority of women who participated in labour force came from Karingani ward (42 women, 35.9%). In Gatunga ward, 78.5% of women didn’t have many livelihood opportunities hence participation in labour force was low.

Table 5: Labour Participation by Ward

Ward	Yes	No
Chiakariga	40 (36.7%)	69 (63.3%)
Gatunga	29 (21.5%)	106 (78.5%)
Karingani	42 (35.9%)	75 (64.1%)

Inferential Analysis of Determinants of Labour Force Participation

Table 6: Determinants of Labour Force Participation

. reg paidwork married years_educ logdist_daycare

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	340
Model	1.68593013	3	.561976709	F(3, 336)	=	2.74
Residual	68.9023052	336	.205066384	Prob > F	=	0.0433
				R-squared	=	0.0239
				Adj R-squared	=	0.0152
Total	70.5882353	339	.208224883	Root MSE	=	.45284

paidwork	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]
married	-.1002636	.0579253	-1.73	0.084	-.2142055 .0136784
years_educ	.0118702	.0062516	1.90	0.058	-.000427 .0241673
logdist_daycare	-.0644792	.0433107	-1.49	0.137	-.1496735 .0207151
_cons	.4097742	.1174993	3.49	0.001	.1786472 .6409012

As shown in *Table 6*, marital status and education have weak significance at 1%. However, distance to childcare facility is insignificant at 5% level. Holding all things constant, an addition year of schooling increases the probability of engaging in paid work by 1.18%. This means that the more years one spends in school, the more income from wage employment. On the other hand, if the proportion of married women increases by one percent, then wage employment will decrease by 10%. This is because majority of the married women do not work very far from their households. Further, if the distance to day care facilities increases by 1%, then this decreases the wage employment by 6.4%.

CONCLUSION

Childcare burden among women in Tharaka Nithi County is evident. Majority spend most of their time in childcare and home chores or leave their children with grandparents and relatives whenever they are attending to socio-economic activities. However, they consider these childcare arrangements as unsustainable since they reduce their ability to diversify their livelihoods, participate in labour market, affects their psycho-social wellbeing and limits child development. Formalizing daycare centres through crèche programme can enhance women economic empowerment in Tharaka Nithi County.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following for both policy and practice:

- i. Funding and institutionalization of the Crèches as community social assets through public and private partnerships

- ii. Women empowerment through skills development to enable them diversify and/or intensify their livelihood strategies
- iii. Development of curriculum suitable for children (0 to 4 years) attending the crèches and equipping crèches with proper personnel and equipment by the County government and other stakeholders.
- iv. Incentivizing women on the importance of Crèche usage in improving their economic development.
- v. Scale up of the Crèche and Women Economic Empowerment programmes in the county by the Tharaka Nithi County Government and other development partners

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