

Editorial

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Centre-Based Childcare Crisis Amid Economic Turmoil in Sri Lanka: Advocating for Equitable Quality, Accessibility, and Affordability

S Navaratna

Department of Community Medicine, Faculty of Medicine,
University of Peradeniya

Correspondence:

S Navaratna

Email: samidi.navaratna@med.pdn.ac.lk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8528-9891>

Amid financial challenges, Sri Lanka is struggling with a childcare crisis that has reached alarming proportions. Working parents, already burdened by financial constraints exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic aftermath, are finding it increasingly difficult to access affordable quality childcare services. The repercussions of this crisis are far-reaching, affecting not only the well-being of children but also hindering the economic productivity of the nation.

First and foremost, the significance of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) provided by the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programmes cannot be overstated. The formative years of a child, typically ranging from birth to eight years old, are a critical period for cognitive, emotional, and social development. Quality childcare and education during this time lay the groundwork for a child's lifelong learning, health, and well-being. It is a key determinant of future academic success, emotional resilience, and even social competence.

In Sri Lanka, strides have been made in recognising the importance of ECEC and ECCD. Guidelines for ECEC centres (1), a national policy on ECCD (2), and a national policy on preschool education have been implemented (3). However, challenges persist, and it is imperative to address them expansively.

Traditionally in Sri Lanka, parents enroll their 3-5-year-old children in ECEC programmes. Within the educational landscape of Sri Lanka, the provision of ECEC services exhibits a distinct dichotomy, namely, preschools and preschools with daycare facilities outside the preschool functioning hours. While a limited number of public preschools and employer-funded creches exist, the predominant majority of preschools adopt a fee-levying structure. Notably, extant research illuminates a disconcerting reality wherein the accessibility and affordability of quality childcare centres are severely constrained within the country (4-6). This editorial examines the prevailing scenario, shedding light on the scarcity of quality childcare facilities and their associated exorbitant costs. The exploration underscores the necessity for policy interventions and strategic measures to ameliorate the existing challenges, ensuring equitable access to high-quality ECEC services across socio-economic strata.

Economic Crisis and ECEC

The existing evidence highlights the considerable cost associated with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and daycare services in Sri Lanka (4). In addition to monthly fees, ancillary expenses such as admission fees, uniform costs, stationery costs, transport costs, and miscellaneous costs (including dietary, diapers, and facility-related charges such as swimming pool usage) contribute



to the overall financial burden. Unfortunately, the absence of a regulatory body compounds these challenges, allowing unchecked escalation in fees by service providers without the corresponding quality of services rendered.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the previously delicate equilibrium that many families in Sri Lanka maintained between employment and childcare responsibilities. The repercussions, including job loss, reduced income, tax deductions, the transition to remote work, and prevailing economic uncertainties, have collectively strained working parents' ability to afford a conducive environment for their children's healthy development. This predicament is particularly acute for households with many dependents, where both parents are employed, single-parent households, and those lacking extended family support.

The prevailing economic crisis has precipitated a notable surge in the incidence of extreme poverty among households, thereby engendering manifold and enduring repercussions on the lives of children (7). In this context, parents find themselves contending with challenges as they endeavour to secure necessities such as sustenance and essential healthcare for their children. Consequently, the enrolment of children in ECEC programmes assumes a diminished priority within the overarching spectrum of parental concerns. The pervasive effects of the ongoing economic downturn have severely compromised familial economic capabilities, especially within the realm of early childhood care and development. This not only accentuates the immediate challenges faced by households but also emphasises the profound and extensive ramifications for the overall well-being and development of children amid these economically precarious times.

The Impact of Early Years Experiences on Brain Development

The ontogenesis of the human brain commences shortly after conception and is generally considered to reach completion in early adulthood (8). Nonetheless, recent studies indicate that brain development can continue throughout the lifespan. (9). While developmental processes persist into the early adult years, the significance of early childhood in shaping a healthy brain

cannot be ignored. This critical phase establishes the foundations for the subsequent emergence of language, social behaviour, and emotional regulation.

The initial stages of brain development during prenatal development are predominantly orchestrated by genetic factors that set the groundwork for subsequent neural maturation, laying the structural and functional foundations of the brain. Contrastingly, postnatal brain development is influenced by environmental stimuli. The synergistic interplay between genetics and experiences becomes increasingly pronounced during this phase. It is within this context that the essence of early childhood as a critical period for brain development becomes salient (8). Therefore, deprivation of enriching experiences during early childhood can yield profound negative consequences for both the structure and function of the developing brain. Studies highlight the indispensability of quality psychosocial experiences for fostering a healthy brain (10, 11). The absence of such experiences can lead to enduring deficits in neural architecture, with far-reaching implications for cognitive, language, emotional, and social well-being.

Perspectives of Parents on Quality Childcare

Quality childcare is not merely a convenience but a crucial component of a child's early development. It lays the foundation for cognitive and language development (10), emotional, and social skills (11), and educational achievements (12, 13) that are fundamental for future success. Therefore, addressing the childcare crisis is not just a matter of convenience for working parents; it is an investment in the nation's human capital.

Research consistently emphasises the importance of the quality of centre-based childcare and its direct impact on parent views and satisfaction (4, 14). Positive interactions between teachers and children are crucial for parental satisfaction. Studies show that warm, responsive, and stimulating interactions contribute to children's well-being and parents' positive perceptions of childcare (4, 15, 16). Additionally, parental views are influenced by the educational content and curriculum offered in ECEC programmes. High-quality programmes that focus on age-appropriate learning experiences and cognitive development

contribute to positive parent perceptions (17). The physical environment and safety measures play a significant role in parent satisfaction. Literature highlights the importance of well-maintained, safe, and stimulating spaces for children in childcare centres (4, 18). Effective communication and opportunities for parental involvement contribute to positive parental views (4). Parents value centres with well-qualified and trained staff (4, 19). Compliance with regulations and participation in accreditation programs are indicators of quality in childcare. Studies show that adherence to standards positively influences parental perceptions (20, 21). The overall effectiveness of the childcare programme in promoting children's development significantly impacts parent satisfaction. Research indicates how a well-rounded programme positively influences various aspects of child competence (22).

Addressing the Dual Challenge of Affordability and Accessibility of Quality Early Childhood Education and Daycare Services

One of the major hurdles faced by parents is the affordability of childcare services. The cost of quality childcare often exceeds the financial capacity of many families, pushing them to compromise on the standards of care their children receive. This compromise not only jeopardizes the children's development but also perpetuates cycles of poverty, limiting their prospects. Another major challenge is the accessibility of quality childcare services, especially in rural areas. Disparities in urban and rural settings contribute to unequal opportunities for preschoolers to receive proper care and education. It is crucial to invest in infrastructure and personnel to ensure that ECCD services are accessible to all, regardless of geographic location.

The government and private sector must collaboratively tackle this crisis by implementing policy reforms that make quality childcare more accessible and affordable. Subsidies, tax incentives, and grants for childcare providers can help alleviate the financial burden on parents. Moreover, initiatives to enhance the skills and qualifications of childcare professionals will ensure that children receive the best care possible.

In addition to financial support, there is a need for a comprehensive national strategy that addresses

the systemic challenges in the childcare sector. This includes the establishment of regulatory frameworks to ensure the quality and safety of childcare services, along with mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.

Furthermore, employers should play a proactive role in supporting working parents by adopting family-friendly policies, such as flexible work schedules and on-site childcare facilities. This not only benefits employees but also contributes to a more engaged and productive workforce.

The role of caregivers and educators cannot be understated. Investing in the training and professional development of ECEC practitioners is essential to ensure that they possess the knowledge and skills necessary to provide nurturing environments for children. This includes a focus on promoting holistic development, recognising and addressing individual needs, and fostering a love for learning.

Parental education and involvement are also critical components of ECCD. Empowering parents with the knowledge and skills to support their child's development at home is a long-term investment in the nation's human capital. Workshops, informational campaigns, and community engagement initiatives can contribute to building a supportive network for parents and caregivers.

Society needs to recognise that investing in quality childcare is an investment in the future. The long-term benefits, both socially and economically, far outweigh the short-term costs. As we navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic era, addressing the childcare crisis in Sri Lanka should be a top priority. By doing so, we can create a more resilient and thriving society where every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their family's financial circumstances.

In addition to addressing immediate challenges, Sri Lanka should also strive to align its ECCD-related policies with global best practices. Learning from successful models in other countries and adapting them to the local context can enhance the effectiveness of ECCD programmes. Collaboration with international organisations and the exchange of knowledge and resources can further bolster the nation's efforts in this regard.

As Sri Lanka marches forward into the future, it is paramount to recognise that the seeds of progress are sown in the early years of a child's life. By prioritising comprehensive ECEC and ECCD, the nation is not only investing in the well-being of its youngest citizens but also laying the foundation for a prosperous and harmonious future. It is a collective responsibility that requires the collaboration of government bodies, communities, educators, and parents to ensure that every child in Sri Lanka has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.

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