

COVID-19, Child Care, and Women's Employment in Egypt

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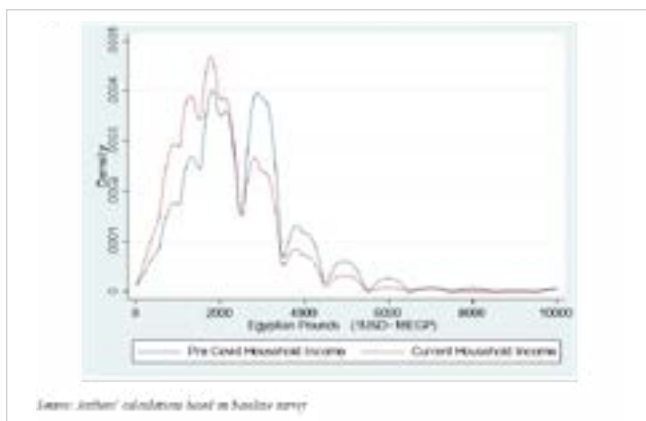


What is the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on child care and women's employment in Egypt?

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Topic at a Glance

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women's employment was low and declining in Egypt. There are three key constraints to women's participation in Egypt's labor market: high opportunity cost of time, weak labor demand, and restrictive gender norms. Reconciling employment and domestic responsibilities is particularly difficult for married women; nearly half of those who were employed in the private sector leave such work as they prepare to marry and wed (Assaad, Krafft, & Selwaness, 2022; Krafft, Assaad, & Keo, 2019). The availability and affordability of child care may be a particular constraint on women's ability to work.



Distribution of monthly household income pre- and during COVID-19, in Egyptian pounds: Average monthly household income was 1928 EGP (~121 USD) in September 2021, a decrease of 14% compared to Feb. 2020, which indicates the poverty of our respondents and the impact of COVID-19. A family of four has a poverty line of 3218 EGP.

We are undertaking a randomized controlled trial to test the effects of providing child care subsidies and employment services on women's employment. Our project is targeted to 5,000 women with young children (aged 1-5) in low-income, informal areas in Greater Cairo, living in the catchment area of partici-

pating nurseries and who are not yet a client of a nursery. Since these women face particular challenges in light of the pandemic, we included in the baseline survey a number of questions on the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on households. This brief summarizes preliminary findings based on 3,265 mothers and 1,246 of their spouses.

New Insights

Childcare: Almost 25% of mothers stated that they worry most about their child getting sick at the nursery, followed by 23% most concerned by the cleanliness of the nursery, and 14% fearing the safety of children. A further 11% were concerned that the child would not be treated kindly. Fewer mothers were concerned about children's learning and stimulation, which may reflect safety concerns being paramount, or a lack of awareness around the importance of early childhood development and stimulation.

Labor market outcomes during COVID-19: Overall, 29% of the women in the sample were in the labor force and 11% of the sample of women were currently employed. On the other hand, 74% of the husbands were employed. These results are consistent with the literature on persistent and widening gender gaps in employment, particularly for married women.

Business closures during COVID-19: 77% of workplaces where women were employed in February 2020 had remained open. Only 10% were temporarily or permanently closed. This does not necessarily mean that women were still employed in the same business (indeed, 13% did not know the business status) nor that businesses were operating the same hours; reductions in hours were more common than closures. In fact, 15% of the women employed in 2020 were out of a job by the time of the survey.

Worker experiences during COVID-19: In the 60 days preceding the survey for those women who were wage workers in February 2020, 76% reported no change in their status while 13% experienced a reduction in working hours, 11% a suspension or layoff and around 6% a reduction in wages. Additionally, around 72% stated they were able to work from home. Looking at the husbands' experiences, only 24% of men stated that there were no changes to their status while 46% were suspended or laid-off, 36% had a reduction in working hours and 20% a reduction in their wages. Some of these differences in experiences between the women and their spouses stem from the different sectors they are employed

in; while 85% of the men work in the private sector, 60% of the women do. Women were also more likely to work in government than men (25% compared to 10%).

Household income: Almost half of the surveyed households experienced income declines since December 2020. Overall, 30% of households saw income decreases of more than 25% while 11% had income decrease between 1% to 25%. Only 33% of households had their income stay the same and few experienced income increases.

Food security: 59% of the households reported being unable to buy the same amount of food they used to because of price increases and 45% stated they could not buy the same amount because their income dropped. While 31% of the respondents said that there was no change in their household food security, 25% of the households needed to reduce the number of meals and/or portions.

Coping mechanisms: Households engaged in a number of other coping strategies. While 54% of the households turned to borrowing from family and friends, 47% turned to selling assets. Fewer spent savings, potentially because this low-income sample had little savings. They may have been unable to borrow formally and thus primarily relied on negative coping strategies and informal social safety networks of friends and family.

Women's time use: Mothers in our sample spent on average 10 hours per day on childcare and 4 hours per day doing household chores in the week prior to baseline. While 66% of mothers have not changed the amount of time spent on childcare in a normal week between February 2020 and September 2021, 22% reported spending more time than usual. Time spent on household chores shows similar patterns; 72% of women reported no change in the time they spent on cleaning and cooking and other tasks compared to February 2020. It is worth noting that this is happening at a time where these women's spouses have often been laid-off from work and so are spending more free hours at home; the unchanged burden of childcare and housework highlights the gender dynamics within Egyptian households that are difficult to reconcile with women's employment.

Gender role attitudes: Only 4% of women stated that they get help from their husbands caring for their children. This contradicts the fact that 93% of men agreed that husbands should help their wives with childcare. While 71% of men believed that husbands should help their wives with housework, we still saw that only 8% of women spent less time on housework despite the fact that 26% of the men are currently not working. Furthermore, 88% of women and 91% of men agreed with the proposition that "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women." This attitude may have played a role in the fact that during COVID-19 women were more likely to exit employment than men.

Policy Recommendations

- Child care plays a key role in allowing women to work. However, child care has to be available and accessible on multiple levels, as well as high-quality, for mothers to be able to send their children safely and engage in work. At baseline, 21% of

women did not know of a nearby nursery, even though by our sampling criteria, they were necessarily within two kilometers of at least one nursery. **Thus, providing information about local nursery availability is an important initial step to providing child care.**

- Mothers expressed serious health and safety concerns as their main worry about nurseries. When children attend high-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE), they gain cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Bernal & Fernández, 2013; Nores, Bernal, & Barnett, 2019). However, low-quality ECCE does not necessarily benefit children and can even be harmful (Bouguen, Filmer, Macours, & Naudeau, 2013; Herbst & Tekin, 2010). **Plans by the Ministry of Social Solidarity to develop a monitoring and evaluation system to ensure nursery quality are critically important; communicating nursery quality information to parents can also be helpful and may even incentivize quality.**

- **Care must be of adequate length to allow employment;** Women who reported other individuals cared for their children reported 5.5 hours of care per day on average, which is insufficient to engage in full-time employment.

- **Care must be affordable;** Women reported being willing to pay, on average, 160 EGP per month for child care (8% of average household income; 90% of the average nursery fee). Child care subsidies are one policy that can make child care more affordable, particularly in low-income areas, and increase women's employment (Clark, Kabiru, Laszlo, & Muthuri, 2019).

- **In the long-term, recognizing, redistributing, and reducing the amount of care work women engage in is critically important to supporting their employment.** Efforts to address women's employment may thus need to address gender norms and care work within the household in conjunction with child care through nurseries.

Limitations

These policy recommendations and findings are based on preliminary baseline data collection. Analysis of data from upcoming follow-up surveys will shed more light on the impact of providing child care subsidies and employment services on women's employment, which might change these recommendations.

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