

Daycare as a Catalyst: Effects of Early Childcare Access on Mothers' Earnings and Older Siblings' School Attendance in Slums of Urban India

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ABSTRACT

Background: In low-resource urban settings, caregiving responsibilities fall disproportionately on women and older daughters, restricting female workforce participation and limiting older girls' educational opportunities. Access to affordable early childcare may alleviate these inequities by enabling maternal employment and freeing siblings from caregiving duties.

Methods: This questionnaire-based study was conducted across five integrated After-school Clubs run by Vision Unlimited, a not-for-profit in the urban slums of Gurugram, India, between 1 and 15 May 2025. A total of 108 mothers of children aged 2–5 years attending the daycare facilities were surveyed using a three-part Hindi questionnaire assessing demographics, employment status and income before and after daycare access. Attendance records of older siblings were also analysed. Data were processed using Python Jupyter Lab, with Welch's *t*-test for unequal variance applied to detect statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$).

Results: The mean age of enrolled children was 4–5 years; 42.5% were girls. Prior to daycare, 62.9% of mothers were employed, earning an average monthly income of ₹3,900 (SD = 1,420). Post-enrolment, average income rose to ₹4,800 (SD = 1,450), with the largest gains observed in mothers of 4- and 5-year-olds (₹3,000–₹5,000). Mothers previously unemployed reported the greatest absolute increases, earning up to ₹6,000–₹8,000 per month. Older siblings' school attendance also improved substantially, with up to a 45-percentage-point increase for families of 5-year-old enrollees. The majority of sibling caregivers prior to daycare were older sisters (97%).

Conclusion: Community-based daycare in resource-poor urban settings demonstrated measurable benefits beyond child development. The intervention improved maternal earnings, enabled new workforce participation and significantly increased older siblings' school attendance, particularly among girls. These findings highlight the potential of affordable early childcare to enhance gender equity, strengthen family well-being, and disrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Keywords: Community-based daycare, Early childcare, Education in resource-poor urban settings, Female labour force participation, Out of school children, School retention.

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INTRODUCTION

Mothers are usually responsible for family caregiving which translates into unpaid household work, in addition to paid work if they are working.¹ In resource-poor settings and patriarchal family constructs, older daughters are their mothers' helpers—often becoming the primary caregivers for their younger siblings when mothers go out to work. This impacts the overall health and wellbeing of the entire family, affecting not only female workforce participation, but also the educational opportunities for older girls.^{2,3}

Access to dependable early childcare and education (ECE) for younger children, therefore, not only lays the foundation for lifelong health, learning and well-being.⁴ It also means mothers can go to work, have more time for leisure and, therefore, more agency. It means older siblings are no longer caregivers and have more access to educational and recreational opportunities. With affordable and accessible early childcare, families thrive. This may result in better gender equity, more nurturing family and social environments and, over time, a reduction in inter-generational transmission of poverty.^{5,6}

Our study aims to provide insights into the impact on mothers' employment and earnings when daycare is made accessible in resource-poor settings in urban India and to ascertain the impact on the older siblings' attendance in school.

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METHODS

This questionnaire-based study was conducted across five integrated After-school Clubs run by a not-for-profit, Vision Unlimited, in the urban slums of Gurugram, Haryana, that provide

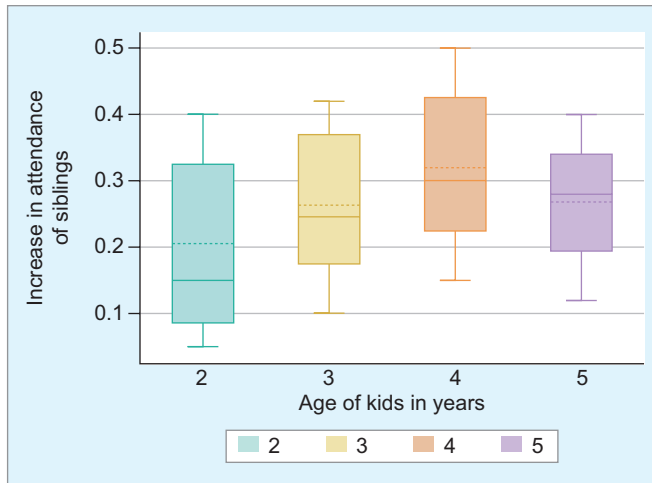


Fig. 1: Older siblings school attendance [daycare access led to a substantial increase in older siblings' school attendance (up to ~45-percentage-points for families with an older child in school).]

daycare facilities for younger children of the community. A total of 108 mothers of 108 children (between 2 and 5 years of age) participated in this survey from 1st to 15th May, 2025. Only those mothers who gave a full, free and voluntary consent were included in this study. The study complied with the ethical tenets enshrined in the 2013 revision of the Declaration of Helsinki. Additionally, the attendance records of older siblings were also analysed to see any change in the attendance pattern before and after the provision of daycare facilities for their younger siblings.

The three-part Hindi questionnaire had questions relating to demographics, employment status and earnings of the mothers before and after the provision of daycare facilities.

The data were analysed using a Python Jupyter Lab kernel, using the Welch's t-test for unequal variance of data with a statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).

RESULTS

The average age of the children attending the daycare facility was 4.5 years ($SD = 0.95$) ranging between 2 and 5 years, while that of their mothers was around 30 years ($SD = 2.69$) and their range between 25 and 37 years. The number of girls in the facility was 46 (42.5%); and 31 (67.4%) had siblings studying in the same after school club. Of these, several were primary caregivers as their mothers were busy doing either paid work outside the home or household chores (71 out of 108, 63.8%). Most of the sibling caregivers were sisters (69 out of 71). We found that the primary caregivers for our children, in the absence of the daycare facilities, were primarily sisters, followed by brothers and fathers.

A total of 62.9% (68 out of 108) mothers were working before the daycare facility was introduced, earning an average of 3,900 INR ($SD = 1,420$), and ranging between 1,000 and 9,000 INR. The daycare helped achieving an increase in salary to an average of 4,800 INR ($SD = 1,450$) and ranging between 2,000 and 11,000 INR. Our analysis also reveals marked positive impacts on older siblings' school attendance. Below, we detail these caregiver and household outcomes (delineated in Figs 1 to 3).

Sibling School Attendance

Enrollment of a young child in daycare was associated with a large increase in that child's older siblings' school attendance. As shown in

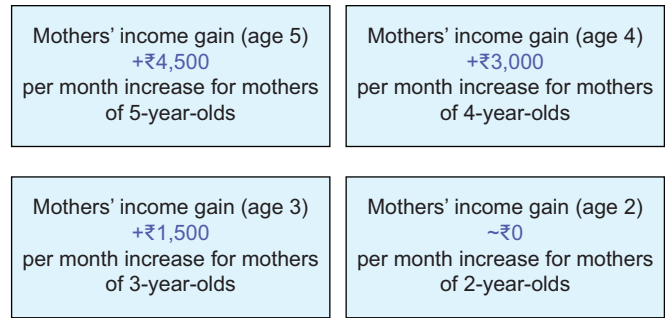


Fig. 2: Average change in mothers' monthly income as a function of the child's age at enrollment

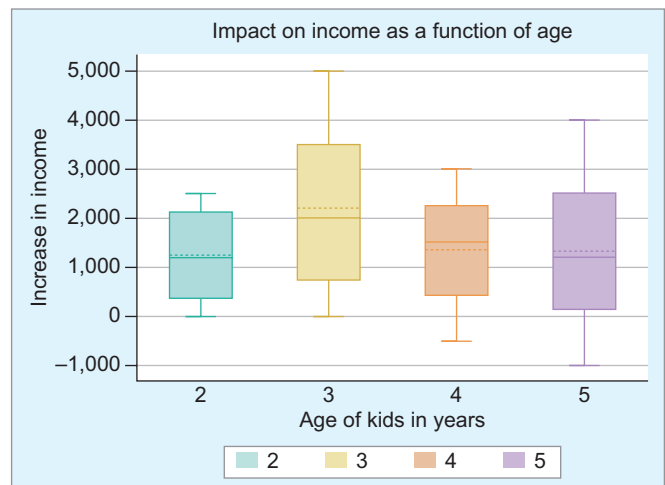


Fig. 3: Increase in caretaker's income as a function of child's age

Figure 1, older siblings of children in the programme attended school much more regularly over the study period. The effect grew with the age of the child enrolled in daycare: Families of 5-year-old enrollees saw approximately a 0.45 increase (about a 45-percentage-point gain) in the proportion of school days attended by older siblings. By contrast, for families of 2-year-old enrollees, there was virtually no change in sibling attendance (near 0 on the same scale).

Maternal Employment and Income

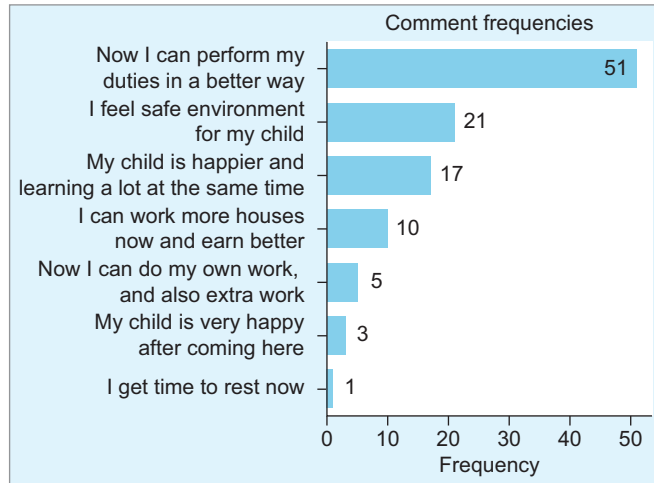
Mothers' incomes rose substantially after enrolling their children in daycare, with the largest gains seen in families with older preschoolers. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the average change in mothers' monthly income as a function of the child's age at enrollment. There is a clear upward trend: Mothers of 4- and 5-year-old children realised significant income increases (on the order of roughly ₹3,000 and ₹5,000 per month, respectively) compared to their pre-enrollment baseline.

In contrast, mothers of 3-year-olds saw a more modest rise of about ₹1,000+, and those of 2-year-olds experienced essentially no net income change (approximately ₹0 on average).

The increase in maternal income was most pronounced among women who were not previously earning, as evidenced by the distribution of salary changes (Fig. 3). We compared each mother's *baseline* income to her *incremental* income gain after 1 year of using daycare. The data show an inverse relationship: Mothers who had little to no income before enrolling their child tended to achieve the largest absolute gains. In fact, several mothers who were

Table 1: Key quantitative changes

Outcome (figure)	Key findings (quantitative)
Older siblings' school attendance (Fig. 1)	Increased by ~0.45 (~45-percentage-points) for siblings of 5-year-old daycare participants, vs ~0 change for siblings of 2-year-olds.
Mothers' income change by child's age (Fig. 2)	Mothers' monthly income rose by roughly ₹5,000 (for age 5) and ₹3,000 (for age 4) on average, compared to about ₹1,000 (age 3) and ~₹0 (age 2).
Mothers' income: Base vs increment (Fig. 3)	Previously non-earning mothers achieved ₹6,000–₹8,000 per month in new income (post-enrolment), whereas mothers with higher initial salaries saw only marginal increments (often under ₹500).

**Fig. 4:** Benefits of the daycare program, as perceived by mothers

previously unemployed (baseline income ₹0) were able to obtain paying jobs once childcare was available – their incomes rose by as much as ₹6,000–₹8,000 per month. By contrast, mothers who already had a relatively higher salary prior to the programme (e.g. earning ₹8,000–₹10,000 monthly) saw only small increases or no change in income.

Summary of Key Quantitative Findings

For clarity, Table 1 summarises the primary quantitative results corresponding to each outcome measure (Figs 1 to 3).

The various benefits of the daycare programme, as perceived by the mothers, were aligned towards enhanced child safety, improved learning outcomes, increased personal and professional efficiency and overall emotional well-being of both the child and the parent. The bar graph illustrates the various ways in which parents feel the daycare has positively impacted their lives (Fig. 4).

DISCUSSION

Mothers in resource-poor communities are not only responsible for unpaid household work and caring for the family, but also for paid work. Juxtaposed against the wider context of patriarchy where the mother is often multitasking, older daughters are often the primary caregivers for their younger siblings. This impacts the overall health and wellbeing of the entire family. For the mother it means not just physical tiredness, but also psychological distress. For the older daughters it means poor school attendance, susceptibility to marriage and the consequently higher risk of socioeconomic deprivation.⁷

Affordable and accessible childcare, especially in resource-poor settings, can increase female labour force participation and

their control over the family's socioeconomic decisions. It can also improve their mental health and emotional well-being by decreasing stress and creating time for leisure and community participation. The latter not only makes their social support structures better, it also enhances their overall agency.⁸

Early childhood (ages 2–5 years) is a critical developmental window, laying the foundation for lifelong health, learning and well-being.⁹ However, disparities in access to quality early childhood experiences persist, disproportionately affecting children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Socioeconomic inequalities, including poverty, maternal depression, exposure to violence, limited access to healthcare, lack of safe spaces for learning and expression, improper nutrition and inadequate educational resources, can hinder optimal development during the early years, exacerbating health and social inequities across the lifespan. These risk factors often occur concomitantly and their impact on the child's development therefore can be cumulative, especially for the poorest children in urban slums. Family stress also increases the likelihood of child abuse or neglect, and the cumulative adversities can adversely impact the children's physiological response systems, precluding self-regulation, and resulting in a failure to thrive.^{10,11}

High-quality daycare programmes can mitigate these disadvantages by combining responsive caregiving, early learning opportunities, nutrition and health services. Even though centre-based care improves cognitive, language, socio-emotional and school readiness outcomes, with particularly strong effects for children in poverty; there is limited evidence from low- and middle-income countries.¹² Integrating nutrition and stimulation further amplifies these benefits, while access to affordable childcare also enables maternal employment and reduces caregiver stress for mothers and older siblings alike.^{13–15}

The introduction of group-based care comes with a few known trade-offs: There may be an increase in minor childhood illnesses due to increased exposure, and the possibility of separation anxiety and emotional upheavals for the children.^{16,17} However, these health risks are manageable with proper hygiene and compassionate care, and do not outweigh the broad social benefits observed.

Accessible childcare has been shown to relieve caregiving burdens from adolescent girls, thereby reducing absenteeism and enhancing their academic engagement.

Conversely, increased reliance on sibling care has been linked to adverse educational outcomes. A US-based welfare evaluation noted that programmes inadvertently increasing sibling caregiving correspondingly diminished adolescents' schooling performance.¹⁸

In contexts where formal childcare is scarce, maternal employment often drives families to rely on informal care arrangements—including sibling care—which may lack educational value and stability.¹⁹ We found that the primary caregivers for our children, in the absence of the daycare facilities, were sisters in the

majority of the cases followed by brothers and fathers, with older sisters taking care of their younger siblings.

This reinforces our observed effect: By substituting child-led caregiving with structured daycare, older siblings—often girls—remain in school, disrupting the cycle of early school dropout. Not only did the older siblings of children in the programme attend school much more regularly, this effect was amplified for the older children enrolled in daycare. For example, families of 5-year-old enrollees saw almost a 45-percentage-point gain in the proportion of school days attended by older siblings with little to no change for families of 2-year-old enrollees.

This dramatic difference suggests that when a preschool-aged child is cared for in a structured programme, older siblings—who might otherwise stay home as caregivers—are freed to attend school. This may not be true for very young children (in our case 2-year-old), as mothers perhaps do not trust their older children with their toddlers, but can afford to leave 5-year-olds in the care of their older siblings.

Our finding is consistent with evidence from other low-resource settings: For example, a community childcare programme in Mozambique increased older siblings' school enrolment by about 6%. More broadly, formal childcare can substitute for adolescent girls' caregiving duties, enabling them to return to education. The spillover educational benefit we observe here underscores that daycare programmes can have multigenerational impacts, keeping older girls in school and contributing to human capital development across the family.

We also found that the mothers' incomes rose substantially after enrolling their children in daycare, with the largest gains seen in families with older preschoolers. Mothers of 4- and 5-year-old children reported a significant income increase (₹3,000 and ₹5,000 per month, respectively) as compared to mothers of 3-year-olds (about ₹1,000+); while mothers of 2-year-olds reported no net income change. This age-gradient suggests that having an older child in full-daycare enables mothers to engage more fully in the workforce or secure better-paid work. Notably, even a 1–2 years difference in the child's age had a large effect on maternal earnings, likely because older children can participate in daycare more independently (allowing mothers to work longer hours or take jobs that were previously infeasible). These results align with global findings that access to affordable childcare boosts mothers' employment and earnings. For example, in a Nairobi randomised controlled trial (RCT), mothers offered free daycare were 8.5 percentage points more likely to work and earned 24% more income than those without access.²⁰ Our data suggest similar or greater income gains, particularly for mothers of older preschoolers, reinforcing the link between childcare provision and women's economic empowerment. At the same time, the minimal gains for the youngest-age-group echo patterns seen in some contexts where very young children's care needs still constrain mothers' work choices. Overall, the strong income improvements for mothers of 3–5-year-olds underscore the economic value of reliable daycare in low-income communities.

Of note was the inverse relationship between the mother's *baseline* income and her *incremental* income gain after 1 year of using daycare. Mothers who had little to no income before enrolling their child, had the largest absolute gains. Those who were previously unemployed found paying jobs once childcare was available, earning as much as ₹6,000–₹8,000 per month. On the other hand, mothers who already had a relatively higher salary

(e.g. earning ₹8,000–₹10,000 monthly) had little or no change in their income. This pattern indicates that the daycare centres enabled several stay-at-home mothers to enter the labour force or substantially increase their working hours, while mothers who were already working full-time experienced less dramatic change. The latter could probably be because they were already working to capacity—either due to paucity of skills that could pay more or the number of hours they could spend outside the house. Such heterogeneity is consistent with prior research: Childcare interventions tend to have the greatest impact on women who were not working before, giving them the opportunity to take up employment. In our context, some mothers with pre-existing jobs likely used the free time from childcare to improve their work-life balance rather than to earn extra money – a behaviour also observed in Nairobi, where single mothers (who were mostly already employed) used subsidised daycare to reduce their overtime work without loss of income. In short, daycare access appears to have unlocked new income opportunities primarily for previously unemployed or underemployed mothers, while those already in jobs saw more modest financial gains (though they may have benefited in other ways, such as reduced stress). This finding reinforces that childcare is a powerful enabler for mothers on the margins of the workforce, a result echoed by studies in Africa and South Asia linking childcare provision to higher labour force participation among economically inactive women. It also highlights the importance of considering baseline employment status when evaluating economic outcomes of such programmes.

Accessible and affordable daycare programmes offer multifaceted benefits that resonate deeply with mothers' lived experiences—enhancing child safety, promoting learning and fostering emotional well-being for both children and parents. In a community-based daycare initiative in rural Bangladesh, caregivers described daycare as a 'safe space' where children gained cognitive and social skills while being protected from risks like drowning or injuries, and notably, mothers appreciated the ability to attend to earnings-generating tasks and household responsibilities without having to worry about their child's safety.²¹

Furthermore, evidence from rural India demonstrates that access to affordable daycare is associated with meaningful improvements in women's emotional and mental health. In Rajasthan, mothers with daycare access experienced a reduction in mental distress symptoms and a higher likelihood of reporting feelings of happiness—emotional shifts that underscore enhanced well-being for both parents and children.

The alignment of mothers' perceptions with established research adds coherence to these findings. Informal, poorly regulated childcare alternatives often fail to offer educational stimulation or reliability, whereas structured, community-based daycare models provide routine, learning opportunities and peace of mind—allowing mothers to work, rest or engage socially without anxiety. This dual benefit—of safeguarding children and alleviating parental stress—can fuel improvements in overall family functioning.

Together, these results demonstrate that high-quality, community-based daycare can yield benefits that extend beyond the participating child to the entire family. We found that in addition to fostering the enrolled children's development, the programme produced measurable gains in older siblings' education and mothers' economic status, which are crucial for breaking cycles of poverty.

CONCLUSION

In summary, our study contributes context-specific empirical evidence from urban India, reinforcing the argument that affordable, high-quality childcare can simultaneously empower women economically and support educational continuity for older siblings. These findings provide strong evidence that early childhood programmes, when well-implemented in low-income communities, can serve as a leverage point for advancing gender equity and building intergenerational human capital in low-resource settings.

IEC Approval

Retrospective review of anonymised routinely collected information.

Limitations of the Study

Our study was conducted in a single daycare setting in urban Gurugram, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to broader community populations. The short follow-up period, as well as recall bias, further restrict our ability to assess long-term outcomes of the intervention.

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