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The World Bank's *Invest in Childcare* initiative:

A vehicle for achieving gender equality and responding to the care crisis?

1. Introduction

In April 2022, the World Bank Group (World Bank) launched the *Invest in Childcare* initiative. Framed as a programme to scale up quality, affordable childcare in low- and middle-income countries, it was described as, “a critical investment to build the next generation of human capital and place women at the center of an inclusive global economic recovery”.¹ The initiative aims to raise US\$180 million in new funding, over five years through a *Childcare Incentive Fund*,² and builds on the World Bank’s preliminary work³ and previous commitments⁴ on childcare. It takes place at a time when the World Bank is also undergoing a ‘refresh’ of its Gender Strategy.⁵

The initiative is an important contribution to the World Bank’s work on childcare and a positive step in that it puts childcare on the global political agenda and exposes the urgent need for a substantial increase in public sector-led investments in childcare.

However, the initiative is being developed in the context of the devastating global impacts of Covid-19 on women’s and girls’ care responsibilities,⁶ and rollbacks on gender equality and rights markers around the world.⁷ Beyond its proposed impact on child development, the initiative also makes claims on the interrelated outcomes of women’s employment and empowerment, family welfare and economic growth. These claims are not always mutually compatible and, moreover, such a profusion of objectives can result in an unclear policy framework. It is these broader claims of the initiative, and the assumptions and gaps in its analysis and conceptualisation, that are the subject of this briefing.

The concern is, firstly, in relation to gender equality, where the initiative’s assumed link between childcare and women’s employment – and even more so with women’s economic empowerment and broader gender equality – can be tenuous. This has implications for the design and implementation of the programme. Moreover, the initiative comes in the context of the World Bank’s gender commitments within the IDA20ⁱ replenishment.⁸ Yet it is firmly

ⁱ *The International Development Association (IDA) is the part of the World Bank that provides one of the largest sources of assistance for the world’s 75 poorest countries. IDA is funded by contributions from the governments of its member countries who meet every three years to replenish its resources and review its policy framework. The latest replenishment, IDA20, was finalised in December 2021.*

situated within the World Bank's Early Learning Partnership without clear links to the institution's Gender Strategy.⁹ Donors should be careful not to overestimate the initiative's ability to address wider gender inequality concerns, recognising the need to support a broader array of initiatives that address the structural barriers to women's economic rights and gender equality.

The second set of concerns relates to the initiative's role within the broader care agenda. Understanding the limitations of the initiative is particularly important given that it appears other donors view it as a vehicle for advancing the 'care' agenda, especially for low-income countries. This is key at a time when the importance of care and the need for adequate funding are finally part of donors' discourse.¹⁰ The 2022 G7 Leaders Communiqué, for example, made crucial advances in recognising the importance of care; however, the only concrete commitment it made was to contribute to the *Invest in Childcare* initiative.¹¹ There is a very real danger, therefore, that funding the initiative will become a substitute for the much broader action needed by donors to invest fully in the public provision of care.¹²

This briefing begins by examining the ambitions and content of the initiative. It then takes a more critical assessment of the extent to which the initiative is equipped to meet its own ambitious objectives, in relation both to women's economic empowerment and broader gender equality. Acknowledging that the initiative itself does not claim to be part of a holistic approach to the provision of care, the briefing then suggests that it will be more effective if it is clearly located within a broader understanding of care; and that it should not be seen as a substitute for donor investment in more holistic care fundings. It concludes with some recommendations for the way forward – both for the World Bank and other donors.

2. What is the *Invest in Childcare* initiative?

The initiative is designed to expand access to quality, affordable childcare, meeting five related policy goals.¹³ In doing so it makes ambitious claims suggesting that childcare, "is among the most important investments that countries can make to build human capital, accelerate equality, and place women at the center of economic growth".¹⁴ The theory is that quality affordable childcare has knock-on benefits in four ways, "Better women's employment, increased family welfare, improved child development outcomes, and increased productivity and economic growth."¹⁵ In relation to gender equality, better childcare is assumed to increase women's labour force participation and enable them to take on better quality employment, while increased family welfare includes boosting "women's confidence", improving girls' attendance at school and reducing early marriage.¹⁶

The *Invest in Childcare* initiative came from the white paper, *Better Jobs and Brighter Futures: Investing in childcare to build human capital*, launched by the Early Learning Partnership team within the World Bank in December 2020. This white paper argued that, "The expansion of quality childcare presents an incredible opportunity to deliver better jobs and bright futures by improving women's employment and productivity, child outcomes, family welfare, productivity, and overall economic growth development."¹⁷

The theoretical underpinnings and stated objectives raise two particular issues that will be addressed later in this briefing. First, the initiative makes bold claims about the links between

the provision of childcare and women's employment, with underlying assumptions then about the links between women's employment, and women's empowerment and gender equality. Second, the initiative is only intended to cover early childhood care and, as such, does not claim to be – nor should be viewed as – more than one small part of the investment needed in the full provision of care.

2.1 Funding streams

The *Invest in Childcare* initiative consists of two streams of funding: Bank-Executed funding and Recipient-Executed funding.¹⁸ The smaller of the two, Bank-Executed funding, focuses on exploratory foundational work to make the case for childcare and develop quality operations through “catalytic grants” to countries, global analytical work and building the capacity of World Bank staff.¹⁹ It also includes knowledge exchange across countries to highlight the need for greater investments in quality and affordable childcare. In this stream, country teams are given seed funding to work with World Bank teams to undertake a variety of activities – such as data collection, evidence gathering, capacity building, and evaluation and methods development – to make the case for childcare. By December 2022, the Bank had awarded 25 Bank-Executed grants, totaling US\$4,320,100, for a variety of projects. These included: assessing, designing and piloting new childcare programmes for targeted communities; developing legal frameworks and regulations for different types of childcare models; and research assessment, policy translation and communications-based work to advance women's empowerment through childcare. (A list of funded projects is available on the World Bank website.²⁰)

The second, larger, stream of Recipient-Executed funding seeks to incentivise countries to invest and scale up the implementation of childcare. This fund is made available to country teams on a 1:1 match basis, up to US\$10 million per country. The projects funded under this stream are expected to provide “quality and sustainable childcare programs and services, scaling up access to childcare through various interventions and conducting evaluations”. Although the World Bank has allocated between US\$80 million and US\$130 million for this funding stream, only one such programme has been funded so far. Somalia's Rajo Kaaba Project aims to improve literacy and numeracy skills of women in selected areas and to prepare women for leadership roles, integrating childcare in each part of the project.²¹

2.2 Frameworks for meeting the initiative's stated objectives

The initiative has a wide range of objectives, and civil society organisations (CSO) that are engaged in related World Bank-led consultations have suggested a number of ways to ensure that its intended impacts can be achieved. As the initiative's Theory of Change and Results Framework continue to be developed, CSO proposals include the need for a better understanding of the challenges constraining the initiative's intended impact and, relatedly, a better set of medium-term outcomes that reflect the complexity of its intended impact.

First, if the initiative is to achieve its stated outcomes around gender equality, it will be important to develop a meaningful set of outcome indicators, beyond traditional numerical metrics. These should include, for example, more nuanced data such as: the quality and working conditions of childcare providers, including their labour and political rights; the income distribution of households accessing childcare services; household costs towards childcare

access, other than just childcare fees; as well as other gender transformative change indicators related to time poverty and how women and men share unpaid care work within households.

To further ensure that the initiative contributes to women's economic empowerment, its intermediate outcomes must include enhanced working conditions and increased pay for childcare providers.²² Also vital is the need to ensure that childcare provision under the initiative complies with decent work standards and is not at the expense of workers in the sector – who are likely to be overwhelmingly women and from marginalised populations.²³

Finally, any theory of change must acknowledge the wider challenges constraining the initiative's intended impact. This should include, for example, the role played by wider World Bank macroeconomic policy prescriptions that have prioritised a “Maximizing Finance for Development” approach to development.²⁴ This can often lead to cuts in public services, particularly education,²⁵ and so greatly increases women's and girls' unpaid care work and negatively impacts their human rights.²⁶ Any theory of change must also recognise the challenge of historic underinvestment in childcare globally, and that the contributions of care work to communities, societies and economies have been routinely undervalued as a result of policy choices that are not gender transformative.²⁷

3. Challenges in achieving the initiative's stated objectives

The initiative itself is positive in that it makes investing in childcare a global policy priority. There is now a growing research and policy argument highlighting the beneficial child development outcomes associated with quality childcare. Studies suggest that access to quality childcare leads to improvement in education and health outcomes for children, especially for children with low socio-economic status.²⁸ It is also welcome that the World Bank has acknowledged childcare and women's economic empowerment as important and interrelated issues.²⁹ However, there are clearly gaps and challenges in the *Invest in Childcare* initiative's framing and analysis in relation to its broader objectives.

3.1 The links between childcare, women's economic empowerment and gender equality

The *Invest in Childcare* initiative is premised on the idea that investing in quality childcare will lead to improved maternal employment, which in turn leads to women's economic empowerment. The initiative also suggests that it will achieve a positive outcome for family welfare, freeing up women's time, increasing women's confidence and enabling greater girls' attendance at school.³⁰

The childcare dividend narrative

The Bank's commitment to investing in quality early childhood care development follows a growing global conversation and understanding about the benefits of investing in childcare, which are centered on the childcare dividend narrative.³¹ This narrative values childcare investment primarily from a human capital development perspective. It argues that investing in quality childcare benefits not only children, because of its positive impacts on child development and human capital potential, but also has benefits for women and the economy

as it creates jobs and enables women to participate in the labour market and earn income. Improved child outcomes and increased maternal employment are also often assumed to result in improved family welfare, productivity and overall economic growth development. Indeed, it appears that much of the *Invest in Childcare* initiative's Bank-Executed funding stream designed to make the case for childcare is dedicated to evaluating the impacts of quality childcare on women's employment and economic empowerment, family welfare and economic growth. Swayed by the childcare dividend narrative, many global policy institutions – including the OECD and the World Bank – also tend to claim further positive spillover effects of childcare leading to positive externalities for women, families and society.³²

The link between childcare and women's employment

Despite these claims, however, studies suggest that the impacts of childcare on women's employment are rather mixed, with a causal link that requires an understanding of the wider economic constraints women face. It should also be noted that unpaid childcare work is done by many women and girls in most communities, not just by mothers. Whereas some studies show positive impacts of quality childcare on increased maternal employment and productivity, others find weak or no impact.³³ For example, a review of evidence from lower- and middle-income countries suggests that, "quality and affordable childcare is a highly effective way to support women's labor force participation, reduce gender pay gaps and increase individual and household income, [though] more evidence is needed to understand the impacts on time poverty and quality of employment." Similarly, four randomised evaluation studies from Brazil, Kenya, Nicaragua and Chile found that, "free or subsidized childcare increased women's labor force participation. However, childcare may not increase employment in all contexts, as the care workload may not be the only limiting factor for women's participation in the labor force. [For example,] childcare had limited impacts on women's work in India, where researchers suggest that limited employment opportunities could hinder the effectiveness of childcare on women's labor force participation."³⁴

The beneficial impact also varies for different groups of women. A study in Vietnam found that childcare had a positive impact on maternal labour market outcomes and household income, but that these effects were stronger for women in an ethnic majority group or women with daughters.³⁵ Elsewhere, a study of childcare and maternal employment in Germany shows that while there was a positive correlation between childcare and higher working hours for mothers, the association between childcare and women's employment propensity was much weaker.³⁶ Furthermore, the analysis in the German study suggests that mothers in disadvantaged groups were the least likely to benefit from the childcare reforms, in terms of their labour market integration. It appears that the impacts of childcare on maternal employment and labour market outcomes are dependent on women's education and socio-economic status.

The link between women's employment and empowerment

Women's labour force participation is not necessarily empowering without access to decent work and changes in the structural norms that assign childcare as 'women's work', suggesting that childcare initiatives need to be part of much broader programmes, and also recognising the different challenges and barriers experienced by women facing different forms of discrimination.

The link between childcare and women's time

The instrumentalist approach within the childcare dividend narrative also insufficiently recognises the structural, social and cultural norms and gender power dynamics that induce women to provide unpaid care. Appropriate childcare has the potential to free up the time of carers, who are predominately women or girls, within families and communities (in most communities, childcare is not restricted to mothers), and it can be an important component of approaches towards gender equality. However, its effectiveness will be reduced without a recognition of the structural barriers faced by different women – based not only on ethnicity or class, but also on occupation and location, which also have considerable impacts on care provision. While access to quality childcare may reduce women's unpaid childcare work, less is known about the link between childcare and the reduction of women's unpaid care work at home. Indeed, in some cases, investment in childcare has not been shown to reduce women's unpaid care work nor equalise or balance mothers' and fathers' unpaid childcare work in the home.³⁷ In India, for example, studies suggest that, “social norms and preferences to use childcare... have been shown to have negative effects on the utilization of center-based childcare...”³⁸ Evidence suggests that without addressing broader social and cultural factors, investing in childcare alone may not necessarily lead to reducing women's unequal care responsibilities or parents' desire to use public childcare systems.

The limits of an instrumentalist approach

These varied outcomes caution against assuming that an investment into quality childcare, on its own, will necessarily result in higher rates of women's employment or increased productivity. While the evidence is clear that investing in childcare can result in positive child development, the assumptions made around the positive impacts on women's economic empowerment and broader gender equality goals are more tenuous.

This kind of instrumentalist argument rarely produces the best outcomes for the 'intermediary' objectives. Gender inequality is caused by multiple factors. These include the disproportionate amount of unpaid care work undertaken by women, labour market and employer discriminations, social and cultural norms, as well as other social and institutional structures and gender power relations that create barriers to opportunities and to women's social and economic advancement.

3.2 Lessons for the future

Getting the programme design right

The potentially beneficial impact of the initiative will be lessened if other factors are not taken into account in the design of the programme, including a more holistic understanding of the structural constraints. Broader and meaningful consultation with local women's rights organisations, childcare worker representatives and user groups is one obvious way to ensure programming reflects contextual constraints, analysis of challenges and solutions. Using a broad base of research, particularly by feminists in the Global South, will also improve the evidence base for specific programming choices. Important considerations for delivering quality programming include robust needs and impact assessments, decent work for carers, quality regulations for long-term care services, and care facilities that are easily accessible and affordable (or, ideally, free) to avoid creating exclusions.³⁹

By over-simplifying causal links, the initiative risks obscuring the reality of the many barriers to the achievement of gender equality that will need to be addressed as part of the broader gender strategy, particularly if the initiative is to reach women who face intersecting discriminations. While the initiative recognises that the types of activities funded through its grants will depend on specific country contexts, there remain inherent assumptions built into some of its planned range of activities, despite lack of sufficient evidence on whether particular methods are best to support the childcare needs of marginalised women. This includes, for example, supporting women entrepreneurs to establish and/or improve childcare services, including home-based care, as a way of increasing access to affordable childcare.⁴⁰ Additionally, there is insufficient evidence to support the initiative's continued push for market-oriented solutions for the provision of care. This is due to questions over the limits of private provisioning in early childhood care and education,⁴¹ as well as across public services in general, reaching especially low-income households in remote locations.⁴²

Realistic objectives

By over-stating its claims, the initiative risks drawing donor funds meant for more focused gender equality programmes into an initiative that is essentially designed to increase childcare provision. While the initiative is itself worthy, particularly as part of objectives on child development, there is still a need to move beyond the childcare dividend narrative while also ensuring that other programmes for gender equality are funded. Crucially, childcare needs to be understood within larger socio-economic and cultural contexts that structure gender power relations and determine gender inequality and, as such, childcare must be considered one of a variety of tools to achieve more gender-equal and inclusive outcomes. It is important, therefore, that the World Bank's new Gender Strategy ensures an intersectional and evidence-based analysis that forms the basis of interventions, understanding the full structural constraints that act as barriers to gender equality and tackling the ways in which current World Bank macroeconomic policy can reinforce these.⁴³

4. Does the initiative contribute to a holistic approach to care?

Importantly, the initiative itself does not present itself as a panacea for the care crisis, nor does it mention seeking to address the provision of care beyond that of early childhood care and education. However, in order for it to be fully effective, the programmes will have to be designed in a way that reflects a more holistic understanding of the importance of care and its provision. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, given the reaction of donors to the initiative it is important to locate it within broader care requirements, as outlined below. It has long been the case that 'childcare' is seen as a proxy or relatively easy option for investment in the full provision of social care.

4.1 A holistic approach to care

Care is an essential component of wellbeing and is central to the functioning of all societies and economies. The 'care economy', also increasingly called the 'social organisation of care',⁴⁴ describes the complex socio-economic network of ways in which care is provided (through the state, households, community organisations and the market) and encompasses both paid and unpaid care work.⁴⁵ Importantly, it includes the care and unpaid domestic work provided to

everyone in society, not just children, the elderly or those with disabilities. The provision of this care has been deeply gendered as ‘women’s work’, used to justify the disproportionate amount of unpaid care and domestic work that women and girls perform and the low wages and poor conditions experienced by those, mostly women, who undertake underpaid care work. As a result, the provision of care is intricately linked with gender equality objectives.

As has been well documented, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the critical role that care work plays in sustaining all societies and economies, including the disproportionate share of unpaid care work carried out by women and girls.⁴⁶ Yet even before the pandemic, the total value of unpaid care and domestic work was estimated to be between 10-39 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁴⁷ At the peak of the pandemic, while many productive sectors had drastically reduced their activities, unpaid care and domestic work increased to account for up to 22 per cent of GDP in countries like Argentina.⁴⁸ Even before the world began to understand the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on care, studies demonstrated the importance and value of both unpaid and paid care work in sustaining our social and economic systems.⁴⁹ This devaluing of care is just as apparent for underpaid care workers. Around the world, women make up 70 per cent of health workers and 90 per cent of social care workers. Already low-paid, the pandemic has further worsened conditions for these workers, with extreme workloads under hazardous conditions.⁵⁰

A holistic and inclusive approach to investing in care recognises that care is a series of life-long interdependencies – between and among people – that connects across all ages, current and future generations, within families, communities and across societies, and that together underpins our social and economic infrastructures. Such an approach recognises that without care, families, communities and societies cannot function effectively and economies will not be sustained efficiently. It also addresses the role that the provision of care plays in achieving gender equality.

Solutions to the care crisis must start with the recognition of the importance of care and care work across policy making, viewing it as a ‘public good’, with governments holding responsibility for its provision as well as regulation. Public investment in gender transformative public services – such as quality childcare, and care of older people and people with disabilities – is vital, as is universally accessible social protection. Solutions will also include reducing unpaid care workloads and domestic work and redistributing it more evenly between women and men.⁵¹

Understanding the provision of care also requires an intersectional lens. Care work is powerfully shaped by gender, but is also structured along race, ethnicity, class, citizenship status, and other socio-economic and identity lines. Women who are racialised, immigrants, migrants and from lower socio-economic classes are overrepresented in the low-wage, care work sector.⁵² Moreover, quality childcare requires a respected workforce that is compensated appropriately and recognised as critical stakeholders whose voice and contributions are essential, with robust systems that acknowledge and support their skills development. It also requires legislation that will ensure care workers, including those in the informal economy, have decent work and are provided with social protections and the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining.

4. 2 Why is the initiative problematic in relation to care?

The World Bank's *Invest in Childcare* initiative does not claim to be a panacea for the care crisis. Nevertheless, it will be more successful in meeting its own stated objectives if it locates its programmes more clearly within the complex structure of social care provision.

Moreover, there appears to be a very real danger among the wider donor community that investment in the initiative will be seen as a proxy for action on the care crisis more broadly. Care is certainly rising up the donors' agenda. In 2022 the German Presidency of the G7 held a conference on care attended by the Japanese and Canadian governments, along with some multilateral institutions.⁵³ The 2022 G7 Leaders' Communiqué made important advances in recognising that, "The Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women and girls and has highlighted the essential role of care work – both paid and unpaid – for the functioning of our societies and economies, but also as a key cause of gender inequalities due to its unequal distribution. It is of paramount importance to recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work, and to reward paid care work adequately, guaranteeing care workers representation."⁵⁴ However, the only concrete commitment they then made was to contribute to the *Invest in Childcare* initiative.

While the initiative is important in relation to child development, it is not designed to address the full range of care funding needed and should not obscure the need for much broader interventions by the donors.⁵⁵

5. Conclusion

The *Invest in Childcare* initiative represents a positive step forward, especially in relation to the provision of childcare as part of child development objectives, and in moving the issue up the political agenda. However, in terms of gender equality outcomes, the initiative could achieve greater impact if it increased consultation and evidence-based programming in relation to the ways in which childcare provision can best improve women's employment and economic empowerment specifically, and gender equality outcomes more generally through its 'family welfare' objectives. Its efficacy against these desired outcomes would also be improved by locating the initiative within a more holistic understanding of the complexity of the social provision of care. It is, in some ways, an example of the dangers of instrumentalisation: assuming and asserting over-simplified causal links towards what are complex and, at times, even contradictory sets of objectives.

In addition, there is a real danger that the World Bank overstates the potential of the initiative in achieving gender empowerment outcomes, potentially redirecting resources away from other more focused and effective programmes as part of the Bank's refreshed Gender Strategy. There is a risk too that other donors, newly interested in funding care-related work, will over-focus their efforts on an initiative that is relatively narrow in design – viewing it as a panacea for the care crisis, rather than tackling the more complex changes needed to address the glaring gaps in care provision across society.

The recommendations below address two main areas. The first set of proposals suggests ways in which the initiative itself could be improved. The subsequent proposals address the ways in

which the World Bank and other donors should recognise the limits of the initiative and develop and fund a broader approach towards gender equality and the provision of care.

5.1 Recommendations for the ways forward

1. To improve the *Invest in Childcare* initiative so that it better promotes gender equality and equitable provision of care, the World Bank should:

- Conduct ongoing consultations with care workers, domestic workers' associations, women's rights organisations, CSOs and other stakeholders, especially in the countries where the initiative will be piloted, to ascertain what interventions are needed in order to design and implement effective policy responses based on lived realities.
- Ensure quality evidence gathering as a way of continuously informing the approach to the initiative, including drawing on the expertise of feminist experts in the Global South.
- Include monitoring metrics for measuring the advancement of gender equality objectives, recognising intersecting discriminations that reflect ambitions on care work and gender equality currently being set out as part of the upcoming World Bank Gender Strategy process.

2. Recognising the need for broader action on gender equality and care, the World Bank and its Board should:

- Ensure that the new World Bank Gender Strategy includes recognition of the need for public investment in the provision of care, beyond a singular focus on childcare, combined with just remuneration for those who provide care and their inclusion in policy making processes.
- Promote within the World Bank the recognition of care as a public good, which benefits society as a whole, with governments holding ultimate responsibility for its provision.
- Ensure that the World Bank Group's wider macroeconomic policy recommendations do not undermine the provision of care or efforts to promote gender equality.

3. Realising their wider commitments to gender equality and addressing the global care crisis, bilateral donors should:

- Require evidence on how the resources from the Childcare Incentive Fund are being used to enhance its proposed impacts on women's economic empowerment, beyond increased female labour force participation.
- Require evidence as to how the investments are being used to best benefit those who are most marginalised and who face intersecting discriminations.
- Given the limited mandate of the initiative, invest in a range of other initiatives that recognise the provision of the full range of care services as a public good – while reducing the uneven distribution of unpaid care work and justly remunerating those who provide care.

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Acknowledgements

This briefing was written by Dr. Ito Peng (University of Toronto) with input from Fiana Arbab, Myrah Nerine, Leena Patel, Katie Malouf-Bous and Anjela Taneja (Oxfam), Mary Borrowman (International Centre for Research on Women), Mareen Buschmann (Care International UK), Asayya Imayá (Uthabiti Africa), Amy McShane (Bretton Woods Project), Jessica Woodroffe and Sophie Efangé (Gender and Development Network). This briefing was edited by Tomilola Ajayi.

The Gender and Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights.

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