

FORO REGIONAL
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Notes prepared for
PANEL #1
Desarrollo del Capital Humano y Reducción de la Pobreza

Topic: Child Care: Contested Ground

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In the brief time we have been allotted, I will:

1. Suggest several reasons why child care should be considered an important part of the discussion of women's participation and development.
2. Draw several relevant findings from a literature dealing with child care and women's work.
3. Suggest several policy and program lines of action.

The main point of my presentation is that unless and until adequate alternative forms of child care that support the intersecting needs of women and children are made more widely available, we will be prejudicing the development and potential productivity and social participation of both groups.

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Although it may seem obvious that child care should be an explicit and important part of the discussion dealing with participation and development of women, and of women in development, child care has often entered the discussion as an afterthought or has been absent. It has remained a "contested ground" in programming.

The reluctance to incorporate child care into the debate and into programming is only in part related to the lingering fantasy that "a women's place is in the home." It is also related to the history of the development of the women's movement and of WID programs, in which the "productive" role of women has been distinguished from the "reproductive" role of women -- with emphasis placed on the productive role. The care and up-bringing of children has not been recognized as a "productive" activity, for understandably ideological reasons. The unfortunate result of this narrow view has been to make it more difficult for programs of child care to evolve that are supportive of, and permit, the economic and social participation of women over a broad front. But there is now an important opening in this view.

Why should programs to improve development and participation of women in development incorporate child care?

1. The obvious first answer is that the lack of adequate child care options inhibits the earning and learning possibilities of women and children. This answer is usually recognized even if it may not be acted upon.

2. A second reason women's programs should incorporate child care is that care is itself a productive investment strategy. In this vein, child care should be viewed not only as a means of increasing productivity in the society but also as a form of employment and income generation.

Here, ground is contested because it is argued by some that employment in child care simply perpetuates inequalities by extending employment to women in a traditionally "maternal" occupation and does not help to place women in the mainstream. I would argue that failure to recognize care as a legitimate form of work results not only in negative effects on the ability of women to earn and learn, but also perpetuates the exploitation of women, both at home and in the growing number of child care jobs outside the home, filled almost exclusively by women who are poorly paid and without social benefits.

3. A third, less immediate but equally important reason why child care should be central to the issues of women's participation and development is that the way in which children are reared bears directly on various gender issues>

- as indicated by Mayra Buvenic, women are primarily responsible for production of the work force.

- discrimination begins pre-natally and is evident during the pre-school years in various forms that child care takes.

- through children, values are transmitted, including gender values.

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Having argued the importance of child care within a context of women's participation and development, let me turn now in a telegraphic way to several important points that emerge from a review of the literature.

1. Historically, women have always worked in economically productive jobs. They have always been in the labor force, recognized by monetary remuneration or not. The narrow definition of women as housewives is a myth. Pleas to return to the "good old days" when women stayed in the home are hollow.

2. Women have rarely been the sole caretakers of their *children.*

Other family members, neighbors and members of the community have, traditionally, played an important role in the process.

3. Previous systems of social support and child care are eroding as migration, urbanization, changes in family structure and the extension of schooling proceed apace. With this breakdown, new support systems are needed.

4. It is not correct to assume that strengthening a woman's productivity and participation will automatically increase the welfare of either the woman or of her children. There may be a trade-off of energy and time that has negative welfare effects on one or the other, or both. This is so in part because families are not necessarily altruistic, welfare-maximizing institutions we think them to be in which benefits are distributed fairly.

5. There is a tension between the so-called "productive" and "reproductive" roles of women that must be dealt with. That tension is particularly acute:

- in conditions of poverty
- in single parent, women-headed households
- during the first year of life of a child
- when alternative child care options are lacking
- during periods of the "life cycle squeeze"
- if work is poorly paid, without benefits, far from home and physically demanding
- in heavy work seasons (e.g., harvest) or "wet" seasons
- where culture strongly dictates an exclusively domestic role for women.

6. The need for **adequate** child care through alternative (to exclusive care by mothers) arrangements is strong and is not being met.

7. To be "adequate" programs of alternative care should be: affordable, accessible, flexible, run by trusted and accountable persons, and meet minimum quality standards.

8. There are many viable options for stimulating the provision of adequate care, including strengthening traditional care in families, establishing programs of home day care for groups of children, self-standing programs of center-based care, and linking programs of alternative care to programs of community development, credit, community kitchens, co-ops or markets, care in the workplace, etc.

9. In many cases, existing options are underutilized because they do not provide adequate care, as defined above. This does not mean that there is no need or demand for alternative care.

10. Community-based approaches to child care, located in

woman's groups or other community organizations can provide an excellent service of care, but typically need some form of subsidy to be sustained over time if they are to serve poorer women and families.

11. There is a need to facilitate direct care of children by mothers during the first year of a child's life.

12. Men are little involved in direct child care or housework.

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Some Policy Implications

1. There is a need to improve and enforce legislation that provides access to child care and that regulates policies of maternal and paternal leave.

2. Additional, "target^{ed}" investment in adequate child care is required, particularly for children where parents are involved in the informal sector and for women-headed households in marginal areas

3. When organizing programs to improve the productivity, participation and welfare of women, the needs of children must be taken into account. Similarly, when organizing programs directed toward the development of pre-school children, women's needs must be responded to.

4. It is possible and advisable to build programs of adequate child care on local experience and capacity, responding to local needs with community-based approaches. This cannot be done without a subsidy and in such programs quality must be guarded.

5. Child care should be viewed both as a social investment and as an area of employment generation. Proper pay and benefits should be provided to those who work in child care jobs.

6. Ways must be explored to re-integrate elders and fathers into the child care process.

7. Domestic labor, including child care, should enter the national accounting system.