In Brief

Strengthening and Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce:
Working Conditions

Why focus on working conditions?

Despite growing recognition of the workforce as central to the quality of early childhood services, the environment for these professionals and paraprofessionals remains poor. Challenging working conditions, such as low remuneration, heavy workloads, and economic instability, make it difficult for early childhood personnel to foster positive relationships and adequately support the holistic development of children in the early years.[1,2]

Working conditions encompass the environment in which the early childhood workforce practices, including the social, emotional, physical, and economic factors impacting their well-being, and ultimately, the quality of service provision.

This brief is based on a study that explores the working conditions of the early childhood workforce, the range of individuals across the health, nutrition, education, and social and child protection sectors who provide services to young children and their caregivers. The study considers the level of remuneration, factors affecting recruitment and retention, the status and morale of the early childhood workforce, roles and responsibilities, health and safety, and support systems available, among other aspects that directly influence job satisfaction.

Findings on Working Conditions

1. Early childhood personnel face low pay and unstable terms of employment, which reduce job satisfaction and retention
2. Heavy workloads, limited access to resources, and challenging working environments contribute to job stress and reduce job satisfaction and motivation
3. Early childhood programs face challenges in recruiting a qualified and diverse pool of candidates.
4. Professional associations and unions can play an important role in advocating for a better supported and more empowered workforce.

About this Brief This Brief highlights findings from a global landscape analysis on Working Conditions, one of 4 global landscape analyses carried out by The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI) to illustrate the size and scope of the challenges faced by the early childhood workforce, highlight promising practices to address these challenges, and provide a comprehensive overview of the status of the workforce worldwide. Policymakers, researchers, program managers, and practitioners can use the findings of these landscape analyses to generate lessons to support and strengthen the early childhood workforce, and enhance existing programs, policies, research, and advocacy efforts.

Key Findings

1. Early childhood personnel face low pay and unstable terms of employment, which reduce job satisfaction and retention.

Early childhood personnel tend to receive low levels of remuneration and financial benefits in comparison to other professions requiring similar skills. In the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector, salaries at the pre-primary level are generally not equivalent to those of primary level teachers.[3] Likewise, personnel working with children ages three and under typically receive lower pay and benefits than their counterparts working with children ages four to six.[4]

In the health sector, Community Health Worker (CHW) programs often utilize volunteers and provide no remuneration other than per diem payments, social recognition or in-kind benefits. Experience varies, however, as some programs provide a nominal stipend, while in Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, and Nigeria, higher-level CHWs are formal civil service positions with benefits similar to those of government employees.[5] Social service workers face similar circumstances; and in sub-Saharan Africa, low pay in the public sector often contributes to workers leaving for higher wages elsewhere.[6] Moreover, using volunteers in a workforce reliant on women and members from other traditionally disadvantaged groups can increase gender and other disparities.[7]

> In South Africa, **83% of ECD operators were not able to pay the full salaries of staff during the lockdown period.** Following advocacy from researchers, the government offered income support of 1000 Rands per month as a temporary relief.[8]
> (Bridge et al., 2020)

Low pay can reduce job satisfaction and morale, increase turnover, and raise sustainability concerns; however, non-financial incentives may increase satisfaction and motivation. Certification after training and promotions can support professional advancement for CHWs entering their roles as volunteers[9] and relationships with or support from supervisors can increase satisfaction among home visitors.[10] Community-level child protection workers highlight recognition by community leaders and small rewards (e.g. badges) as important incentives.[11]

> In the U.S. median pay for child care workers is **$24,230** per year in 2019, compared to **$59,420** for kindergarten and elementary school teachers.[12]
> (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020)

Increasing job security, including providing longer term contracts and instituting legal frameworks, can assist with workforce recruitment and retention. Short term contracts can create instability and encourage staff to seek more stable opportunities elsewhere, as experienced in the Cuna Mas program in Peru.[13] The WHO guidelines for CHWs recommend providing paid CHWs with a written agreement specifying roles and responsibilities, working conditions, remuneration, and workers' rights.[14] In the Philippines, a Magna Carta for Public Social Workers[15] outlines legal rights and privileges including terms of employment and ethical standards for the profession.[16] Legal frameworks can also establish guidelines for training and other standards which can collectively contribute to elevating the identity and status of workers.[17]

2. Heavy workloads, limited access to resources, and challenging working environments contribute to job stress and reduce job satisfaction and motivation.

Early childhood personnel face heavy workloads across sectors. As much of the work of the early childhood workforce focuses on relationship building, it is important to keep workloads reasonable. Large classroom sizes were identified as a stressor among personnel in OECD countries,[18] as well as in low- and middle-income countries. In 2017, the average pupil-teacher ratio at the pre-primary level in low-income countries was 34:1 compared to 14:1 in high income countries.[19]

Personnel often have added responsibilities, including administrative tasks, which can further exacerbate workload. For preschool teachers in the Ukraine, paperwork took up to one workday a week and contributed to job dissatisfaction.[20] CHWs, like other members of the workforce, are often saddled with a number of tasks. In Pakistan, Lady Health Workers (LHW) were frequently overwhelmed with additional tasks, including loading and unloading of medicines,[21] and experienced stress when the number of tasks assigned increased without their consultation.[22] In the Cuna Mas program in Peru, facilitators work twice the number of hours stipulated by the program despite their voluntary status and limited compensation.[23]

Limited access to work-related resources (e.g. counseling cards, medicines, play materials, development assessment tools, etc.) presents further stress and workload issues. Job aids such as identification badges and health education materials such as counseling cards and first aid kits help workers perform their tasks and can also provide a sense of affiliation and build confidence in their roles.[24] Home visiting personnel in Peru similarly found that worn and inadequate play materials hindered their ability to carry out visits and abide by the program guidance, as well as required additional time to repair the resources.[25]

Members of the workforce also face safety issues that impact their abilities to carry out their roles. These issues include:
▶ Threats to physical safety, particularly for female members of the workforce who receive physical and sexual assault threats while carrying out their roles.
▶ Health risks, especially during epidemics such as Ebola and the coronavirus pandemic, given regular physical contract with children and families.[26]
▶ Psychological trauma, as they struggle with high rates of burnout and stress in their roles. Additionally, many early childhood personnel work in high poverty communities and may face secondary or "shared" trauma.[27]

3. Early childhood programs face challenges in recruiting a qualified and diverse pool of candidates.

Across roles, sectors, and countries, early childhood programs struggle to attract qualified workers to the field. Consequently, they are exploring different ways of recruiting prospective workers while also trying to ensure that they gain the competences needed to carry out their roles. In India, Anganwandi supervisors had a 35% vacancy rate,[28] while in England, the ECEC sector had roughly 25,000 staff vacancies across private and voluntary posts.[29] Shortages in the child protection and social welfare sector has led to an increasing reliance on para-professionals.[30] However, many countries have also started raising their minimum education qualifications, with France, Iceland, and Italy now requiring pre-primary teachers to hold master's level qualifications.[31]

Vietnam, along with other countries, have started media campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of ECD and to counteract societal impressions of an "unskilled" workforce.[32]
(Bury et al., 2020).

Increasingly, countries are trying to track the influx and outflow of workers (e.g. new volunteers entering the field, workers migrating to other countries, workers leaving the field for other sectors) to inform staffing and other decision-making processes. Sierra Leone has been using workforce mapping tools to collect relevant data on CHWs (e.g. competences, location) and use such information to identify gaps and deploy workers to the areas of greatest need.[33] Tanzania uses iHRIS Health Workforce Information Systems Software for similar purposes, as well as to analyze remuneration and promotion patterns.[34]

The low social status of the early childhood profession has contributed to limited enrollments in training programs and compounded workforce shortages. Many students in pre-service training only intend to stay in the field for a limited period before transitioning to other roles, such as teaching at the primary level[35] or to better paid or otherwise more attractive opportunities. To improve the public perceptions of personnel, some countries, such as Vietnam, have started media campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of ECD and the responsibilities of authorities at different levels.[36]

Alternate entry points, including apprenticeships and train-in-place programs that offer students a chance to earn while they work, have been used to attract workers to the field. Germany now offers paid practice-integrated vocational training and apprenticeships, while the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) in Singapore is exploring more flexible entry points to the profession to attract individuals returning to formal work or switching careers. These include "train-in-

place" programs that allow participants to undergo training while working and earning a salary, and an apprenticeship model with fewer classroom hours than traditional training programs the opportunity to receive on-the-job coaching by experienced educators.[37]

The early childhood field is not representative of the population it serves, despite more recent attempts to increase diversity. While the sector is largely dominated by women, recent public relations campaigns have targeted men,[38] as well as promoted peer support initiatives among prospective male workers and those already in the field.[39] Some efforts have also been made to create alternate entry pathways, provide financial support for pre-service education and training, and implement incentive structures for those working in rural areas, in an attempt to increase ethnic, linguistic, regional, and socio-economic diversity. Efforts are still needed to increase representation of persons with disabilities within the field.

4. Professional associations and unions can play an important role in advocating for a better supported and more empowered workforce

There are several examples from Europe of early childhood staff engaging in collective action to improve their pay and working conditions. In LMICs, however, ECEC workers are generally not organized to engage meaningfully in social dialogue and collective bargaining. The Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators (BUPL) represents more than 95% of all pedagogues (all trained early childhood and school-aged child care staff) in Denmark and aims to "defend the professional rights of the pedagogues both in the field of salary and working conditions as well as the quality of education and care in the different types of child care services."[40]

Given the wide diversity in their roles and workplaces and their relatively low status, early childhood personnel have been less likely to benefit from workers' rights movements than teachers in the formal system.[41,42] Even when early childhood educators work in preschools and become part of the formal education system, existing teacher associations or unions tend to be dominated by concerns of higher levels of education.[43] However, in Sri Lanka, the All Ceylon Union of Teachers has recruited and organized ECE teachers and pressured the government for the expansion of ECE services to reach more poor and marginalized children, increased public funding for ECE and teacher training, and the protection of the rights of ECE teachers.[44]

At the global level, Education International (EI) – a international federation of teachers' trade unions that represents over 30 million education personnel – has played a prominent role in promoting ECE that is publicly funded and universally accessible. EI also supports partnerships across affiliate unions. For example, since the 1990s, BUPL and the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT) have partnered to help organize early childhood workers with the aim to promote recognition, prestige, and respect for work with young children.

In the social services and health sectors, national associations have helped to establish and disseminate professional codes of ethics, which promote values and principles to guide the profession (e.g., human rights, social justice) and expected behaviors (e.g., confidentiality). In recent years, global and regional early childhood networks of practitioners, civil society organizations, and government officials have played a key role in advocating for the early years and amplifying the voice of practitioners in the field across education, health, and social protection sectors.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a representative and professional body for child care workers in Ireland, **the Association of Childhood Professionals, has advocated for financial and safety measures when reopening ECEC services.** These include wage subsidies and increases to cover enhanced cleaning, and subsidizing virtual modes of service delivery if in-person capacity is reduced due to updated public health guidance, insufficient staff availability, and COVID-19 fears.[45]
(Association of Childhood Professionals, 2020)

Policy Recommendations

▶ **Provide stable and adequate financing for programs so that they may offer salaries and benefits packages that more closely align with skills and responsibilities required** of the early childhood workforce and are competitive to those received by educators of higher levels. Efforts to adequately compensate the workforce should also try to minimize economic insecurity (e.g. limiting short term contracts), as well as strive to ensure continuity of pay and benefits during periods of crisis, such as COVID-19.

▶ **Protect the health and well-being of the early childhood workforce** by providing monetary and non-monetary incentives (e.g. health insurance, transportation benefits, adequate leave policies) that support their health, mental health, safety, and overall well-being while carrying out their roles. Measures should also be taken to reduce heavy workloads (e.g. minimizing administrative tasks, limiting the number of children and families served) and increase flexibility to reduce burnout and stress in the field. Engage the workforce in decisions around task-shifting and additional tasks and responsibilities.

▶ **Document the working conditions and experiences of personnel.** Establish methods of collecting regular feedback from the workforce on their experiences (e.g. pay, career advancement, workload, and safety) to illustrate the realities that personnel face in their roles, and inform policy and programming decisions. Create avenues for personnel to share amongst themselves (e.g. through professional learning communities) and other stakeholders (e.g. decision-makers).

▶ **Develop flexible entry points to the profession to increase and diversify the supply of workers.** Recruit from non-traditional candidate pools, develop competency-based requirements that recognize prior knowledge and practical experience, and provide flexible training opportunities (e.g. on the job training) to rapidly increase the knowledge and skills of new personnel. Ensure that professional development and advancement opportunities are linked to increased responsibilities and remuneration.

▶ **Strengthen workforce planning to address the uneven recruitment and deployment of staff across programs and geographies.** Collect and aggregate data on the influx and outflow of workers to identify staffing gaps and allocate trained workers to the areas with the greatest need.

Areas for Further Research

This study contributes to the knowledge base on working conditions, however, further research is needed in the following areas:

▶ The effectiveness of strategies to improve the working conditions of members of the workforce, and strengthen the overall quality of early childhood programs.
▶ The strength of the relationship between different aspects of working conditions (pay, workload, benefits, etc.) and recruitment and retention efforts.

▶ The extent to which recruitment efforts target potential early childhood workers with disabilities.
▶ The impact of unionization, social movements, and collective action on improving the working conditions of members of the workforce.
▶ The cascading effects of COVID-19 on the working conditions for the early childhood workforce.

Spotlight on COVID-19

Emerging evidence shows that COVID-19 has presented members of the workforce with a unique set of challenges (e.g. exposure to diseases, lack of essential supplies) that affect their abilities to carry out their roles (Zero to Three, 2020).[46] **As programs work to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic, special attention should be paid to prioritizing the working conditions of early childhood personnel.** Although much remains to be seen on how to best support workers during this unprecedented time, lessons about how to support personnel now and in times of crises can be drawn from the following examples:

▶ To reduce the likelihood of early childhood workers losing their jobs during COVID-19, the Philippines' Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Council **created a set of guidelines that outline activities (e.g. parent surveys, disseminating learning materials) that workers can continue to carry out during the pandemic, and instituted measures to promote safety (e.g. sanitizing work areas)** (Bonsu, 2020).[47]

▶ Let's Grow Kids, a non-profit organization in the U.S, recommends that the Government implement a *"COVID-19 Child Care Recruitment and Retention Incentive Program"* that **provides qualified workers with a financial incentive (e.g. $500) to help mitigate some of the financial burdens they are facing** (Richards, 2020).[48]

▶ The Association of Childhood Professionals, a representative and professional body for child care workers in Ireland, recommends that the government **increases consumable and wage expenditures related to COVID-19 (e.g. cleaning materials) and subsidizes virtual modes of service delivery if in-person capacity is reduced** (Association of Childhood Professionals, 2020).[49]

The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative

The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI), a multi-stakeholder global initiative co-led by Results for Development (R4D) and the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) that works to support and empower those who work directly with young children.

This brief was written by Kavita Hatipoglu with inputs from Vidya Putcha, Denise Bonsu, and Michelle Neuman (R4D). The complete landscape analysis on Working Conditions can be accessed at: www.earlychildhoodworkforce.org/content/landscape-analysis-working-conditions

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