



CSW 70 Justice for Women Brief

Affordable Childcare and Women's Workforce Participation

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Childcare is essential for economic growth, gender equity, and child development. **The lack of a national childcare infrastructure is a significant barrier that exacerbates racial, gender, and economic inequality, perpetuating cycles of poverty.** Families face unaffordable costs and limited access, while care providers are paid low wages, particularly affecting women of color in lower-income brackets. This insufficient support limits women's workforce participation and civic engagement. Without a national childcare plan, these issues will continue to hinder women's involvement in decision-making and the economy.

Research indicates that women, particularly mothers, disproportionately bear unpaid care responsibilities at home. The lack of family-friendly policies restricts economic opportunities for families, especially women, due to caregiving demands. Structural barriers like inflexible childcare hours, language issues, and access challenges, particularly for immigrants and communities of color, exacerbate this burden. UNICEF defines early childhood care as including various forms of unpaid labor. Families with lower and middle incomes face significant challenges with childcare costs and accessibility, highlighting the need to recognize and redistribute unpaid domestic work.

Current Challenges

- Access to childcare is shaped by infrastructure, and its lack creates barriers to employment and safe childcare options, limiting families' ability to earn income.
- Childcare costs are a significant burden for families, with median expenses ranging from \$6,552 to \$15,600.¹ This situation often disproportionately impacts women, who typically bear the primary responsibility for childcare, resulting in reduced work hours or even leaving the workforce entirely.

Fast Facts

In the United States, women undertake approximately 65% of unpaid caregiving responsibilities, dedicating an average of 245 hours each year, which is valued at around \$643 billion.² This commitment to unpaid care is significant, as women spend 37% more time on these tasks daily compared to men.³ The scarcity of childcare resources has a particularly profound effect on women, as it hinders their ability to participate in the labor force and maintain economic independence.

High Cost of Childcare

- The average annual cost of center-based care per child was \$13,128 in 2024, rising roughly 29% higher than inflation since 2020.⁴
- These costs represent about 10% of a married couple's median household income, and 35% for single-parent households, far above the HHS benchmark of 7% affordability.⁵
- National estimates report some families spending as much as 27% of household income on childcare, with many expecting to pay over \$18,000 annually in 2023.⁶

Access & Supply Constraints

- The number of licensed family childcare (FCC) homes dropped by approximately 12% from 2019 to 2023, while childcare centers have only modestly recovered from pandemic losses.⁷
- Families often live in childcare deserts lacking licensed care or flexible-hour support, compelling reliance on informal Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) arrangements.

Economic and Policy Impact

- U.S. unpaid care is valued at over \$1 trillion annually, primarily driven by women's labor.⁸
- Childcare-related workforce disruptions, particularly among mothers, are dragging down economic growth and labor force participation.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Build a National Childcare Infrastructure:** Create federally supported childcare frameworks and expand access in underserved areas, educational institutions, and other places to help support parents.
2. **Increase Workforce Compensation:** Raise wages (currently approximately \$12.24/hr.) and career support for childcare workers to enhance quality and retention.
3. **Ensure Affordability for Families:** Cap childcare costs at 7% of income and expand subsidies and tax credits to ease financial strain on low- and middle-income households.
4. **Support Informal Care Providers:** Provide training and stipends for FFN caregivers and enable care during non-traditional hours to support shifting workforce patterns.
5. **Promote Gender Equity:** Enact policies that support a cultural shift toward shared caregiving and align childcare, paid leave, and work flexibility with gender justice goals.

Resources

Grundy, Adam. 2024. *Rising cost of child care services a challenge for working parents.*

Araujo, Valeska, Linden McBride, and Danielle H. Sander. 2025. *The impact of childcare costs on mothers' labor force participation.* Center for Economic Studies.

Wielk, Emily. 2025. *Bipartisan wins for working families in the 2025 reconciliation package.* Bipartisan Policy Center.

¹ Department of Labor Women's Bureau 2025. *National Database of Childcare Prices.*

² National Partnership for Women & Families 2024. *New analysis shows unpaid care work in the US is worth more than 1 trillion each-year.*

³ Hess, Cynthia, Tanim Ahmed, and Jeff Hayes 2020. *Providing Unpaid Household and Care Work in the United States: Uncovering Inequality.* Institute for Women's Policy Research.

⁴ Child Care Aware of America 2025. *Child Care in America: 2024 Price & Supply.*

⁵ *Child Care in America* 2025.

⁶ Care.com. 2023. *New Care.com report reveals soaring childcare costs are crippling majority of American families.*

⁷ Child Care Aware of America 2024. *Child care at a standstill: Price and landscape analysis.*

⁸ National Partnership for Women & Families 2024.