



Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute

**The Impact of Enhancing Early Childcare Nurseries
Sector on Promoting Women Participation
in the Palestinian Labour Market**

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Foreword

The purpose of this study is to bridge the gap in knowledge on the reality of nurseries in Palestine, by providing a comprehensive analysis and description of all aspects and determinants of early childhood care at formal and home-based nurseries. Globally, this sector has come to be known as the “care economy”. More specifically, this study is concerned with the relationship between this sector and gender equality in job opportunities in the private and public sectors. It formulates recommendations on methods to improve both early childhood care services and working conditions at nurseries, contributing to the need to support Palestinian women’s entry into the labor market. This study also outlines recommendations on strengthening policies for the adoption of nurseries at the workplace, and for investing in childcare centers and associated facilities. These recommendations cover the reform of labor regulations and improving work conditions, helping to create more equal opportunities for women to benefit from decent employment within the labor market.

The study revealed that early childhood care services are limited; if such an option is available, it may not be feasible, it may be too expensive, or it may not provide a safe and stimulating environment for the child. The provision of early childhood education/care centers for children under the age of five is exclusively limited to service providers from the private sector, with no provisions by the public sector. Enrollment depends to a large extent on the family’s income. The results of the survey, and interviews conducted, showed that numerous provisions of the labor law are clearly violated, where a significant percentage of female workers at nurseries do not enjoy the rights stipulated by the law. Female workers at nurseries are routinely denied maternity leave, sick leave, end-of-service compensation and are paid less than the minimum wage. Moreover, there is a large discrepancy between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, especially in the level of wages. The study recommends activating the roles of both the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Labor in this regard. There is a need to coordinate efforts between them, such that they can play a comprehensive and effective role in monitoring licensed nurseries, strengthening their control and supervision to ensure that workers enjoy the full rights afforded to them by Palestinian labor laws.

We extend our thanks to the International Labor Organization (ILO) and its Palestine office for providing MAS with the opportunity to conduct this study, under their regional programme “Promoting Productive Employment and Decent Work for Women in Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine (Work4Women)” implemented in cooperation with the United Nations Women’s Agency with funding from the Government of Sweden, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). We also thank them for providing the facilities required for the implementation of the study, and for passing on information and ideas. Moreover, we extend our thanks to the research team at MAS and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) for their noteworthy efforts in collecting quantitative data and completing this process within the allocated timeframe. We also thank everyone who contributed to supporting - and dedicating time and effort to - the implementation and preparation of this study. This includes representatives of the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor, trade unions, local and international organizations active in the field of early childhood care, and survey participants such as the owners of nurseries and daycare givers. These stakeholders enriched this study with information on the reality of early childhood care in Palestine, participating in detailed discussions on challenges, opportunities and practical recommendations that can contribute to the further development of this national, strategic sector.

Raja Khalidi
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Executive Summary

Early childhood care services are among the basic services that governments and local authorities are obliged to provide to their citizens, as specified by international charters and human rights' conventions. These conventions detail legal measures and legislation that guarantee the provision of high-quality services ensuring the proper growth and development of the child. Investing in early childhood development programs and services ensures a solid foundation for children's growth and advancement, ensuring that children receive attention, care, personal development, health services, education and social support from their first day and across the first few years of their life. Moreover, providing quality and affordable early childhood education and care services is essential for working parents, especially young mothers with young children, enabling them to stay in - or return to - their jobs. There is also a strong relationship between women's participation in the labor force and the availability of affordable care services, such that a larger number of women can earn regular - and higher - incomes in the formal or informal economy.

Nurseries and childcare centers in Palestine play a major role in the socialization of children and their psychological and physical development, providing them with early childhood care services. This is reflected in socio-economic, social realities, particularly with regard to improving the reality of the labor market for women, characterized by high unemployment rates and low labor force participation rates. However, the caregiving options offered to Palestinian women who have young children are limited, as such services are often not available. Even when these options are available, they are typically inaccessible, too expensive for newly equipped nurseries, unsafe, or unable to provide a stimulating environment for children. According to the data in the Population, Housing and Establishments Census for 2017, there were 321 licensed nurseries providing daycare services. It should be noted that the number of children since birth up until the age of four reached about 718,923 in the middle of 2021. This reflects negatively children growth and development, as well as on the reality of Palestinian women in the labor market.

Studies and reports on the reality and caregiving in the nurseries in Palestine are very limited. To the best knowledge of the researchers, there is no comprehensive survey on the nurseries' sector, in terms of the quality of services provided, or the reality of working conditions in them. In this context, this study, conducted by the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) and commissioned by the International Labor Organization (ILO), bridges this gap. It provides a comprehensive analysis and description of all aspects and determinants of the early childcare sector, covering both formal and home-based nurseries in Palestine, and their relationship to the realities of gender equality in employment opportunities in both public and private labor sectors. The study also details recommendations how to improve early childhood care services and working conditions at nurseries, in ways that contribute to supporting the entry of Palestinian women into the labor market. Additionally, it outlines recommendations to strengthen policies for developing the role of nurseries in the workplaces, in cooperation with government agencies and partners in the field.

The study also seeks to develop a special assessment of nurseries and childcare centers in the Palestinian territories, in order to support policies aimed at investing in childcare centers and their facilities, while strengthening provisions governing work conditions and improving these at the workplace. This is in order to create more equal opportunities for decent work for women in the labor market. The findings and recommendations of this study will help to provide viable

proposals for the benefit of relevant governmental entities, the ILO and its partners in the social sector, designing a model of childcare in Palestine for establishing high-quality nurseries, or providing alternative solutions for childcare at the workplace.

This quantitative study covered mainly nurseries that were surveyed by the Ministry of Social Development during March-June 2022.

In this regard, three questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data. The first was the nursery owners' questionnaire, which focused on working conditions, the work environment, employers' perceptions, the quality of services provided, contracts and workers' rights, the distribution of operational costs and required fees. The second questionnaire targeted caregivers (nannies) at nurseries. This focused on analyzing work conditions from caregivers' perspectives, work relationships at nurseries, the nature of contracts and their relationship to job security. The third questionnaire targeted parents (fathers and mothers). It focused on identifying the quality of services provided in nurseries and their impact on parents' choice of nursery, the reasons why they accepted - or were reluctant - to register their children, while identifying required fees and their impact on choosing a nursery. The sample of home-based nurseries was selected via the social networks of the research team and employees of MAS in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as there is no database for homebased nurseries at any official authorities regarding such nurseries, additionally, the Ministry of Social Development has limited authority over them given the ministry's scope of work is with licensed nurseries.

The study reached an important set of results and conclusions concerning both legal and regulatory issues governing early childhood care services, and the terms and conditions of work for female workers at nurseries.

The legal and institutional framework. The study indicated that the legal regulation of nurseries goes back to the era of the Jordanian administration, based on the Ministry of Social Affairs' Law No. 14 of 1956. Based on Article 4 in this law, subsequent decisions, regulations and systems were issued for nurseries, the most important of which is Cabinet Resolution No. 155 of 2004, which assigned the task of supervision over nurseries to the Ministry of Social Development, and Cabinet Resolution No. 86 of 2005 regarding the regulation of nurseries, which was superseded by Cabinet Resolution No. 11 of 2011. The study showed that the regulations and laws issued by the Palestinian Authority to organize the nurseries' sector - via the 2011 Cabinet Resolution - do not include clear texts and lack executive or supervisory mechanisms to govern the nurseries' sector, especially home-based and unlicensed nurseries. For example, Resolution No. 11 of 2011 did not specify any kind of penalties on nurseries that violate the provisions of this Resolution, or that did not correct their conditions within the six-month period granted to them. This was stated in the text of Article 35, that corresponds to Article 37 of Resolution No. 86 of 2005 implemented in the Gaza Strip. .

Moreover, the size of penalties imposed on unlicensed nurseries is not commensurate with the size of the violations that are committed, especially concerning unlicensed nurseries and the risks arising from that. Moreover, the Resolution was devoid of any requirements regarding the necessity of compulsory insurance against risks to children in the nursery. Within the same context, the division and resulting separation of the institutions of the Palestinian National Authority between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip posed a challenge to the establishment and development of policies and legislation at the national level in terms of organizing the nurseries' sector. This is especially true in light of current legal and legislative challenges in the Gaza Strip. When comparing implementation processes in force in the Gaza Strip (based

on Resolution No. 86 of 2005), they lag behind those processes in force in the West Bank (based on Resolution No. 11 of 2011), regarding the licensing, control and supervision of nurseries.

Article 14 of the regulations cited in Cabinet Resolution No. 11 of 2011 give the public sector a supervisory role over the nurseries, performed by the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Public Works, the Ministry of Health, governorates, municipalities and civil defense units. This includes receiving and assessing license applications and conducting field inspections to ensure that required standards are adhered to. Each agent is authorized to grant or revoke a license, according to its area of competence. The role of most of these government agencies ends after granting the license, and the task of supervision and management remains solely with the Ministry of Social Development - as well as the Ministry of Health in coordination with the Ministry of Social Development - to organize periodic visits to follow-up on health conditions at nurseries. That is, the process of granting a license is a collaborative one. However, this collaboration ends after obtaining the license. The results showed a lack of human and financial resources at the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Labor, in terms of continuous follow-up and control over the nurseries' sector, in addition to the lack of coordination between concerned ministries and stakeholders, resulting in the absence of an effective method to supervise nurseries' services. In the same context, the lack of mechanisms and plans to deal with the problem of unlicensed nurseries, and low-cost, home-based nurseries, has contributed to the spread of such institutions in recent years. This has further complicated reality, negatively affecting the quality of childcare services. Consequently, there is a lack of trust and interest on the part of parents to register their children at nurseries. In addition, there is a marked absence of comprehensive surveys that reach these types of nurseries, in order to determine their size and geographical distribution. This adds new difficulties at the level of planning and policy development for this sector.

The reality of early childhood care services in Palestine. The study found that there are limited services for the care of young children, and if there is an option, it is either inaccessible, too expensive, or it does not provide a safe and stimulating environment for the child. The provision of early childhood education and daycare centers for children under the age of five is limited exclusively to service providers from the private sector, with a marked absence of providers from the public sector. Enrollment in these (private nurseries) depends largely on family income. Moreover, there are weaknesses in the management of early childhood education and care programs in Palestine, as their services are not affordable or easily accessible, while there is little coordination between relevant ministries and stakeholders to supervise their services. Reality in the Gaza Strip is more difficult, as the study found a deterioration in early childhood education and care services for children under the age of four years, mainly due to the weak oversight of government agencies.

The study found that a large number of villages and towns are devoid of licensed nurseries, forcing employed women to place their children in home-based or unlicensed nurseries, or to take their children with them to licensed nurseries in the city, where most of them work. This increases financial and family burdens on working women. In this context, the nurseries' model in the workplace constitutes a great opportunity for working women, while also contributing to opportunities for women's participation in the labor market.

As for the reasons for nursery owners' reluctance to officially register their nurseries, the owners of such unlicensed nurseries stated that this is due to their fear of taxes imposed by the government, in which the nursery is considered to be a profitable enterprise, although the

reality of the matter is that such establishments are social projects with limited income that just about covers operating expenses and staff salaries. Moreover, nurseries are obliged to source additional devices and equipment to meet licensing terms, placing an additional financial burden on the nursery's owner in terms of obtaining the license. Additionally, low fees collected from parents - given difficult economic conditions - makes nursery owners unable to provide employment rights to their staff. As such, they prefer not to register their nursery, in order to avoid statutory labor obligations. In this context, many stakeholders indicated that the absence of governmental oversight over unlicensed or home-based nurseries provides their owners with more operational freedom than licensed establishments.

The results show that the majority of nurseries provide on-site health and safety. However, it is more difficult to measure the extent of their availability at unlicensed or home-based nurseries, given the lack of inspection visits to monitor the progress of these nurseries and the work environment within them. At the same time, there are weak aspects of healthcare at nurseries, especially those related to the early detection of cases of developmental delays or disabilities, which require personalized interventions according to each child and his/her abilities. The study also indicated that there are clear weaknesses in the skills of caregivers (nannies) working at nurseries, as a result of the absence of development programs in the field of early childhood. Moreover, nurseries operating in Palestine focus primarily on the physical health of the child, and do not work to meet the child's needs for early stimulation. This negatively affects the quality of daycare services provided at nurseries. In this context, despite the Ministry of Social Development assertion of their provision of services to nurseries through their support in providing necessary resources that qualifies them to work as well as educational means through donor institutions such as UNICEF, several nursery owners confirmed the shortcomings of supervisory authorities, particularly the Ministry of Social Development, in up-skilling and training their caregivers and staff through specialized training programs, in order to further develop their capabilities. Most of the limited training programs that have been implemented were instigated with funding from international institutions operating in Palestine.

The terms and conditions of work for female workers at nurseries. The results of the survey and interviews showed that there are clear violations of many provisions of the labor law, as a large percentage of female workers at nurseries do not enjoy the rights stipulated by the law, such as maternity leave, sick leave and end of service compensation. Moreover, there is little compliance with the minimum wage law, especially as the Council of Ministers' Resolution No. 4 of 2021 set the minimum wage at NIS 1,880, with large discrepancies between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, especially in the level of wages. For example, 20.4% of female caregivers in the West Bank earn less than NIS 1,450, the former minimum wage, while only 25% of female workers earn a wage higher than NIS 1,880 shekels, but less than NIS 2,470 shekels, or the national poverty line. In other words, 77.2% of female workers at licensed nurseries in the West Bank work for a wage that does not meet the requirements for a decent life, and cannot be relied upon as a primary source of income. In the Gaza Strip, the reality of caregivers working at nurseries is exceedingly difficult, as 97.1% of them earn less than NIS 1,450. The percentage of female workers who are not entitled to annual leave - or receive no compensation for the absence of this leave - is about 28% (25% in the West Bank compared to 45% in the Gaza Strip). Meanwhile, the percentage of those who do not receive maternity leave (despite meeting maternity conditions) reached 45% (46% in the West Bank compared to 33% in the Gaza Strip). 18% are not entitled to sick leave (17% in the West Bank compared to 31% in the Gaza Strip), while 27% are not entitled to compensation for work-related injuries (24% in the West Bank compared to 47% in the Gaza Strip).

Based on an analysis of previous studies and the results and conclusions that were reached, the study concludes with recommendations on improving the reality and services of early childhood care, across numerous parameters.

The role of government, its policies and its strategies

- Support and activate the role of the Ministry of Social Development such that it can play a full and effective role in monitoring licensed nurseries, through increased supervision over the process of childcare at nurseries, in conformity with national standards.
- Activate the supervisory role of the Ministry of Labor over nurseries, to ensure their adherence to the provisions of the Labor Law.
- Activate supervision and control of identifying unlicensed nurseries and home-based nurseries by the Ministry of Social Development and relevant authorities, in order to determine the extent to which they can obtain licensing, based on each specific case and its needs, in terms of time required to correct the situation, or take the necessary legal and administrative measures against it.
- Conduct a comprehensive survey to identify unlicensed nurseries, and then request that these nurseries meet the conditions and standards required to resolve this situation, while shutting down those nurseries that violate regulations specified in, according to approved legal procedures.
- Work the application and implementation of the national program to provide early care services in nurseries in accordance with the Early Childhood Strategic Plan (2022-2024) prepared in partnership with governmental and non-governmental institutions constituting a reference point for all nurseries to abide by in terms of preparing educational care plans and following up on the growth and development of children enrolled at nurseries.
- Setting and coordinating developmental agendas to allow for a better distribution of budgets needed to provide basic needs and more efficient, effective and sustainable services according to the sector's development priorities.
- Increase investment in the early childhood sector through the establishment of governmental nurseries, while working to meet the needs of public officials working in early childhood care services. These can serve as a model for an ideal nursery that provides high-quality care services.
- The government should allocate additional funding for staff, policy/curriculum development, performance management, and monitoring and follow-up systems.
- Work to implement a comprehensive needs' assessment at the national level for female workers at nurseries and for the nursery owners' union, such that it can play an effective role in planning the further development of caregivers' capabilities through intensive courses, training and continuing education programs.
- Mobilize and coordinate funding from the private sector for early childhood development services, such as working to facilitate investment in setting-up nurseries in the workplace.
- Work on developing infrastructure at licensed nurseries by equipping and modernizing facilities, and providing them with the necessary equipment and tools to ensure that they provide high-quality care services that contribute to increasing parents' participation, while building trust between them and the community.
- The nursery owners' union should adopt a real and effective role in providing legal support to unlicensed nurseries for obtaining licenses.

- Strengthen the role of civil-society institutions engaged in childcare, while taking an active role in educating citizens about the dangers of unlicensed nurseries.
- Undertake lobbying and advocate at the national level, such that work proceeds to integrate nurseries within the government sector, under the framework of the Ministry of Social Development.

Legislation and policies governing the early childhood sector

- Cooperate with local organizations to lobby and advocate for obtaining the approval of the Ministry of Labor for the profession of nursery educators, as classified within the national classification of professions.
- Raise the awareness of nursery owners on the importance of nursery registration, which will further enhance nursery services and improve the rates of children's enrollment.
- Concerned government agencies should facilitate registration and licensing procedures, in addition to reducing fees and taxes after the process of officially registering the nursery, while also providing special tax incentives in the early years of a nursery's life in order to motivate the owners of unlicensed nurseries to register them with official departments.
- Concerned authorities (Ministry of Labor/Ministry of Social Development and unions) should educate nursery workers on the importance of working at a registered nursery, to ensure appropriate working conditions and preserve the rights of caregivers and nursery workers.

Improve the quality of services provided at nurseries

- Develop the infrastructure (adaptation) to facilitate access for children with disabilities and those with special needs.
- Periodic review and monitoring to ensure that the nursery is a safe place for the child by developing facilities, devices and equipment at nurseries, especially with regard to play areas and green spaces, while ensuring that each nursery has security and safety measures in place to protect children during their stay at the nursery.
- Improve the means and methods of communication between the nursery and parents such that the latter can follow-up on their children's development at the nursery. This includes integrating modern means of communication and follow-up at nurseries, in person or remotely.
- Develop the capabilities of caregivers by providing them with the skills required for effective communication and relationship-building with parents, while increasing the number of individual or group meetings with parents to discuss - and develop collaborative plans - that support the child and promote his/her growth and development.
- Implement a comprehensive, national awareness campaign to raise parents' awareness on the importance of early childhood as an important stage in a child's life, while urging parents to enroll their children in nurseries and not ignore this important stage.
- It is necessary to promote societal awareness on the importance of officially licensed and registered nurseries. Herein, the focus is on educating parents on the importance of licensed nurseries in terms of providing a safe environment where the child's developmental requirements are met, in addition to enforcing health, security and safety measures that protect the child at the nursery.

Developing the skills and capabilities of caregivers

- Providing required support for training and developing caregivers' capabilities and all workers at nurseries and childcare centers, providing them with knowledge and practical experience in the field of childcare and child development, in addition to developing caregivers' capabilities in working with - and integrating - children with disabilities.
- Work on developing a unified curriculum and work plans at nurseries that are adhered to by all nurseries at the national level, focusing on the cognitive, emotional, social and creative development/growth of children.
- Ensure that caregivers and nursery staff are trained in the skills necessary to identify children at risk, and provide educational opportunities for children with disabilities, or those who suffer from psychological or functional difficulties and problems.
- Work to ensure that all nurseries' programs factor-in health issues, incorporating health screening and early diagnosis to identify functional difficulties in children, and making the necessary referrals for follow-up.

Encourage investment in the early childhood sector

- Update and harmonize the current national strategy of the Palestinian Authority for early childhood development interventions. Coordinate between various sectors (health, education, social development, construction and infrastructure) and donors (UNICEF, UNRWA, donors in the fields of motherhood and early childhood) in order to formulate an implementation plan for the further development of the early childhood sector, and in particular, implementing various measures that can improve the reality of nurseries. Expand the coverage of the Palestinian Authority's early childhood development program, through enhanced coordination, the development of strategies, and the identification of measures and priorities of national, strategic importance in early childhood development. This can be realized by:
 - Developing a comprehensive strategic document to establish early childhood development interventions and integrate them with the economic and social priorities of government, stakeholders and donors.
 - Preparing a detailed implementation plan for the next five years that defines integrated and comprehensive sectoral activities in the field of early childhood.
 - Coordinating efforts between concerned ministries while clearly defining responsibilities for the development of the early childhood care sector at the national level.
 - Coordinating the distribution of interventions between the Ministry of Social Development and concerned ministries (Ministries of) based on the priorities of each intervention. During the past years (2018-22), the focus was on health projects and the provision of safe water for children, without focusing on the development of the nurseries' sector in an integrated manner.
 - Coordinating between the public sectors, local/international NGOs and private sector partners on service delivery, such that the Palestinian government and the private sector can fully fund current needs across several sectors. Allocate aid to finance investments in early childhood that will achieve greater economic returns on such investments, while improving social outcomes and further developing this sector in both the short and long term.
- Allocate funding to the establishment of model nurseries that comply with local and regional specifications and standards, including infrastructure and facilities,

mechanisms and action plans according to the developmental needs of children, and the provision of highly qualified staff to work at nurseries.

- Support nurseries with development projects and further develop their infrastructure to improve the quality of services at nurseries.
- Lobbying with concerned authorities alongside the Ministry of Labor on the importance of the existence of a union for nursery workers, such that the union becomes a recognized entity representing nurseries and their employees, while actively contributing to improving work conditions and defending the rights of caregivers.
- It is possible to improve the cost of services at nurseries in an equitable manner for both nursery owners and parents alike, to enroll their children in high-quality nurseries by conducting awareness workshops for parents, and community meetings with specialists, on the importance of cooperation and social responsibility for the improvement of this sector.