

# HOW TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF MOTHERS' TIME DEMANDS ON CHILDREN'S DIETS

## Insights from women traders in Ghana

Globally, women undertake a larger share of domestic and care work than men. This work is crucial for the provision of goods (e.g. cooked meals) and services (e.g. care) to members of the household including children. In addition to unpaid domestic and care work, women also perform many other tasks. As a result, women are often time-burdened, that is, they have competing demands on their time which force them to cut down the time spent on some of these activities. For example, time demands for work outside the household may force women to reduce domestic and care work. A reduction in this time may potentially impact the goods and services available to members of the household.

This Policy Brief sheds light on the impact of mothers' time demands in Ghana on the quality and quantity of children's diets and analyses pathways that could mediate the impact of time burdens on children's nutrition.

### Domestic work and children's nutrition

**Children's nutrition is affected by myriad factors including nutrient absorption and retention, food intake, physical activity, food quality and quantity, and sanitation and hygiene.** Due to gender and cultural norms that influence the division of labour in the household, women play a key role in the processes impacting children's nutrition. They are often primarily responsible for the procurement, preparation and provision of food to children. Globally, women undertake three-quarters of unpaid care work. They maintain hygiene in the household and its surroundings, and the personal hygiene of children. This impacts the disease environment and thereby children's nutrition. Provision of drinking water and water for other uses is also often women's task and impacts the nutrition of members of the household, particularly children.

### Mothers' time demands and children's diets

**Women's knowledge and ability to provide nutritious, healthy and diverse food is salient to the health and nutrition of their children.** Carrying out various tasks surrounding the provision of such food demands

time. Reducing the time spent on food provisioning may reduce the quality or quantity of children's diets. A lack of dietary diversity or gaps in frequency over extended periods may damage children's health and long-term nutrition. Such a reduction can result from competing demands on time due to multiple activities in the farm, business or paid work. The likelihood that an infant receives an adequate diet can be lowered by up to 21 percent due to their mothers' time demands.

### Substitute caregivers and infrastructure

**Mothers' reduced time for domestic and care work is expected to negatively impact children's diets only if there are no alternatives to the care provided by mothers.** Changes in mothers' time in food preparation may be compensated by other members of the household who may step in to provide for and look after children. Moreover, a reduction in the time in these activities may not reduce the quality or quantity of the output if the time is used more effectively. Access to infrastructure, domestic technologies and improved services may improve the efficiency of time inputs. Significantly, access to piped water may reduce the time required for food preparation allowing mothers to provide their children with adequate diets in less time. The likelihood that an infant receives food at an adequate frequency when their mother is time-burdened can increase by up to 50 percent when their household has access to piped water.

### DATA SOURCE

The data was collected through a survey of 525 women traders in two regions in Ghana (Bono East and Accra) which also gathered data on 296 children aged 6-61 months. Three dietary indicators were assessed i.e. Minimum Meal Frequency (MMF), Minimum Dietary Diversity (MDD) and Minimum Adequate Diet (MAD) for infants aged 6-23 months and Dietary Diversity Score (DDS) was assessed for children aged 24-61 months.



## Findings

The time demands on women traders in the markets harm their children's diets in terms of adequacy but this effect is to some extent mitigated if substitute caregivers are present and households have access to piped water.

**Boys and girls whose mothers trade in the markets eat less frequently on the days their mothers spend more time in the market and less time on work inside the home.** Infants aged 6-23 months are less likely to receive adequate diets on days when their mothers spend more time in the market and there are no alternative caregivers available. The effect of mothers' time on activities inside the home depends on the activity they perform; there is a small positive effect of mothers' time in caregiving activities on the quality of the infants' diets.

**Children between the ages of 2 and 6 years receive less diverse diets when their mothers have to spend more time in the market and there are no other caregivers present in the household.** The probability

that these children receive adequately diverse diets is lower by 16 percent when their mothers have higher time burden. These children receive more diverse diets when their mothers spend more time caregiving. However, children between 2 and 6 years do not receive less diverse diets on days when their mothers spend more time at work outside the home if they have substitute caregivers.

**Access to piped water in the household raises the probability that infants aged 6-23 months receive adequate diets** on days their mothers work more outside the home to 0.6 compared to infants in households who do not have access to piped water where it is 0.4. Moreover, for infants in households with piped water, the magnitude of the negative effect of mothers' time demands on their diets is lower compared to households without this access even when their mothers spend more time at work. This suggests that in households with access to piped water, mothers can provide their infants with adequate diets even by spending fewer hours.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Provide affordable and good-quality childcare** to ensure that children receive adequate diets when their parents, particularly mothers, are engaged in income-generating activities.
- **Invest in infrastructure to facilitate access to safe drinking water** to save time on collecting water from sources outside the house.
- **Shift gender norms for more sharing of domestic and care work** based on a multi-pronged approach to changing gender norms such as education, advocacy and role models reflecting more gender equal distribution of care work.

The policy brief is based on the study:

Saleemi S., Bubune Letsa C., Owusu-Athur J., Mohammed A., Baah-Tuahene S., Yeboah M. and Omari R. (2024) Impacts of mothers' time on children's diets. ZEF Discussion Paper No. 337.

The studies are available at [www.r4ai.org](http://www.r4ai.org).

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## IMPRINT

Center for Development Research (ZEF)  
Genscherallee 3 | 53113 Bonn | Germany  
E-Mail: [presse.zef@uni-bonn.de](mailto:presse.zef@uni-bonn.de)  
Phone: +49-(0)228 - 73 18 46  
Brief prepared by: Sundus Saleemi  
Layout: Yesim Pacal (ZEF PR)



**zef**  
Center for  
Development Research  
University of Bonn