Navigating Urban Childcare Challenges: Perspectives of Dhaka City Parents

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Abstract:

This study delves into the evolving landscape of urban childcare in Bangladesh, focusing on the experiences and challenges faced by parents in Dhaka city. This paper argues that the traditional childcare arrangement of city families is inadequate to meet the development needs of children. The study aims to explore the childcare challenges faced by urban parents as they transition from traditional family-based childcare networks to alternative caregiving arrangements amidst urbanization, economic shifts, and social transformations.

Utilizing a mixed-method research approach, combining quantitative surveys (n = 200) and four qualitative interviews, the research examines the parental viewpoints on childcare practices and the role of societal norms and values. The study finds childcare crises in both the family and daycare settings. In family care, caregiving suffers from the less availability of grandparents, a lack of skills of caregivers, and a lack of child interaction. As for the daycare, it is affected by the absence of appropriate policies, a lack of quality, health and safety concerns, affordability issues, and cultural concerns.

Additionally, the study highlights inadequacies in childcare policies and regulatory frameworks, calling for comprehensive reforms to address the childcare vacuum in urban areas. By shifting the focus from developed to developing countries, this study contributes to the literature and suggests policy implications for Bangladesh and beyond.

Keywords: Childcare, Child Development, Childcare Policy, Daycare, Family Care, Bangladesh

1. Introduction:

In Bangladesh, childcare has traditionally been provided within the family network, with parents serving as primary caregivers and relatives providing additional support (Zhang et al., 2020). This familial structure has long been integral to providing children with crucial early developmental stimuli within the home environment (Peisner-Feinberg, 2007). The situation has changed over time due to the progress of industrialization, rapid urbanization, and substantial capital-bound migration.

The transition towards an economy dominated by industry and services sectors has reshaped familial structures and employment patterns, leading to a surge in female workforce participation, a trend of

smaller nuclear families, and diminishing neighborhood cohesion (Heal & Hossain, 2013; Elsey et al., 2020; Zhan et al., 2020; Ministry of Finance of Bangladesh, 2022). However, such a transition is hardly followed by the necessary adaptation to the childcare system. Consequently, urban parents find themselves increasingly isolated from the traditional support systems of grandparents, relatives, and neighbors, leaving them to grapple with childcare responsibilities independently.

The juxtaposition of economic advancement and society's tendency to depend on traditional childcare practices can be understood by the cultural lag theory. Despite advancements in material culture and workforce participation, societal norms and values often lag behind (Ogburn, 1966), hindering the adoption of modern childcare solutions. This cultural mismatch exacerbates the strain on working mothers, who struggle to balance employment demands with childcare responsibilities amidst changing familial and societal structures. Moreover, in urban settings, the traditional reliance on familial childcare networks has been disrupted, leaving many parents to seek alternative caregiving arrangements (Elsey et al., 2020).

Despite growing awareness of childcare challenges in Bangladesh, existing literature predominantly focuses on the scenario of developed countries, overlooking the perspectives of developing countries (Murshid, 2016). The little research conducted in developing countries is often donor-funded and targets low-income people, the struggle of middle-income urban parents is hardly known. This study aims to address this gap by examining the experiences and challenges faced by Dhaka city parents in navigating childcare responsibilities. By exploring parental viewpoints, the study seeks to inform policy formulation and promote dialogue on improving childcare practices to support children's holistic development. To guide this investigation, we pose the primary research questions: what childcare challenges do parents encounter in Dhaka city? The question aims to explore the issue and identify key variables associated with the evolving childcare landscape in urban Bangladesh. This will inform researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders involved in addressing the issue.

2. Literature Review:

Child development

The study of child development spans various disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, and sociology based on their respective disciplinary perspectives and methodologies (Berk, 2013; Case, 1973; Leonard, 2016). Early theorists, such as Locke (1693), Freud (1905), Piaget (1913), Erikson (1950), and Hurlock (1978) suggested that children are born as blank slates or tabula rasas that grow over time through cognitive, emotional, and psychological development within the context of the family, peer relationships, and broader social influences. From a psychological perspective, Piaget's cognitive-developmental theory posits that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment (Berk, 2013; Case, 1973). While, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights the influence of culture on children's development, emphasizing the role of social interaction with More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) (Bruner, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky proposed that interaction with individuals possessing greater knowledge facilitates children's acquisition of community knowledge and culture (Bruner, 1984). This theory suggests that through engagement with adults and knowledgeable peers, children can develop proficiency in communication and meaningful activities (Morin, 2012). Vygotsky (1978) further elaborates on this concept, stating that development initially occurs on a social level through interactions between individuals, and later manifests on an individual level within the child's psyche. We drew the theoretical framework for the research based on this theory.

Childcare

McNeil (2005) observed that the understanding of childcare varies from society to society. From developed countries point of view childcare centers played the central role in the landscape of childcare, while in developing countries it is understood as parental and non-parental family care (McNeil,

1999; Elsey et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Lewis (2001) studied the issue and historical changes in social organization and the recasting of normative gender roles as reason behind such a different conception of childcare. The post-World War II era marked the first appearance of these changes in developed countries in women's emancipation, weakening male roles, and increased marital instability (Siren et al., 2020). Consequently, a great deal of attention has been paid to developing public policies that facilitate the integration of work and family life (Abendroth & den Dulk, 2011; Araujo et al., 2018). As a result, parents in developed nations commonly opt for daycare, preschool, or non-parental childcare arrangements for young children (Araujo et al., 2018).

The link between childcare and child development

The early psychological theories, especially attachment theory, did not support the idea of nonmaternal caregivers for children arguing that it stresses "an infant's need for continuity and stability of contact" (Hansen & Hawkes, 2009). However, in today's society, women stay outside for work, making it difficult for mothers to provide childcare during the day. Therefore, non-parental care has become a common occurrence in modern society. Moreover, research (Richardson et al., 2018) indicates that nonmaternal childcare for a certain period is beneficial for mothers as it helps to alleviate their mental stress.

Quality childcare at daycare centers or by trained family caregivers plays a multifaced role in society. It enables women to play productive and reproductive roles in society (Huang & Yeoh, 1994). Beyond female employment, previous research showed a close relationship between quality early childhood care and child development. Ruzek et al. (2014) conducted a study in the United States that showed higher quality care for toddlers is associated with higher levels of cognitive development at 24 months of age. It also helps children gain school readiness. Furthermore, children whose caregivers demonstrate higher-quality interactions show improved communication, problem-solving, and fine motor skills (Araujo et al., 2018).

Cultural Lag, Gender issues, and Childcare

Throughout history, childcare has been considered the mother's responsibility (García-Mainar et al., 2011). According to European household data, the hourly time allocated to childcare varies significantly between fathers and mothers (European Community Household Panel - Access to Microdata, 2004). For example, fathers spend 7.9 hours per week in Italy while mothers spend 30.14 hours each week. These statistics, however, did not receive much attention at work; employers expect equal commitment and performance from female employees.

Gender issues and the cultural lag theory can be used to explain the problem of childcare practice (Ogburn, 1966). There is a cultural lag when one of two correlated aspects of a culture lags behind, resulting in maladjustment in society (Schneider, 1945). Despite considerable advancements in economics and technology, manifested through urbanization, migration, and female employment, we still view childcare through traditional means (Zhang et al., 2020). In our society, there is a good and bad mother dichotomy; mothers who provide in-home childcare are considered good and vice versa (McNeil, 2005). In United States a non-custodial father sued the mother for custody of a child because he would not allow the child to attend daycare (McNeil, 2005). The court awarded custody to the father. In the verdict, daycare facilities were not only defamed but rather fuel was added to the bad mother dichotomy as well. Here is a description of the bad mother dichotomy in the United States; the situation is much more difficult in developing countries like Bangladesh (Elsey et al., 2020).

State-level initiative to support childcare

The policies and institutions in developed countries are designed to facilitate the childcare efforts of parents, especially those with low incomes (Ministry of Manpower, 2017; Rong et al., 2019). In addition to providing general assistance to formal childcare, some developed countries, such as Australia, Canada, Japan, and Singapore, offer

specific government subsidies for childcare and a tax rebate in order to assist single parents in accessing such childcare (Huang & Yeoh, 1994; Hayashi & Tobin, 2017; Ministry of Manpower, 2017; Rong et al., 2019). The situation is quite different in developing countries. Even in counties with childcare center legislation, parents find that daycare facilities are inaccessible due to high costs, poor accessibility, inadequate facilities, and variable quality of care (Huang & Yeoh, 1994).

In Bangladesh, government policies and measures are limited. Previously, a section of the Factory Act of 1965 suggested that all factories with 50 or more female employees had to set up daycare centers (Zhang et al., 2020). To govern and regulate the daycare centers in Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi government enacted the Child Daycare Center Act in 2021 (Child Daycare Law, 2021, 2021). By law, all daycare centers are required to register with the government. However, the government has not established an agency that is authorized to issue registrations. As a result, all the daycare centers in the country are running their operation without any registration.

3. **Method:**

Design

The study utilized a deductive reasoning process, leveraging existing theory to guide inquiry. Employing a mixed research approach, it integrates both quantitative and qualitative methods to offer a comprehensive exploration of the research questions (Creswell, 2013). This methodological choice facilitates triangulation of data, enhancing the robustness of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Sampling

A non-probability sampling technique, snowball sampling, was assigned for the questionnaire survey. Because the study sought to develop an understanding of an understudied population (McCombes, 2022). This approach facilitated rapid access to a sizable sample (n = 200) within a limited timeframe.

Survey

Based on the research question, the survey questionnaire delved into prevailing childcare practices among parents in Dhaka city and the associated challenges.. All questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale, except for the demographic data. Demographic characteristics such as sex, age, geographic location, and employment status were examined to ensure sample representativeness. Filtering out respondents without daycare-aged children or residing in rural areas ensured alignment with the study's focus. Ethical considerations were meticulously observed, with respondents provided detailed explanations of the study's purpose and afforded the opportunity to provide informed consent.

Interview

We conducted four key informant interviews, purposefully selected from parents and daycare administrators. These interviews extended, clarified, and interpreted survey results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), offering firsthand insights and fostering nuanced discussions beyond structured responses (How to Analyze Interview Transcripts in Qualitative Research, 2022). One interview was conducted with a daycare administrator to elucidate parental perceptions of daycare, while the remaining three interviewees represented diverse caregiving arrangements: grandparent care, daycare attendance, and housemaid assistance.

Analytical techniques

Descriptive statistics, including mean, median, mode, and Spearman's correlation coefficient, were employed to analyze survey data. Being it the ranked data, we conducted Spearman's correlation coefficient analysis. Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS were utilized for data analysis, with Likert scale responses coded for statistical interpretation.

Thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data obtained from interviews, utilizing deductive approaches informed by the study's theoretical framework and survey results. Transcribed data were meticulously annotated and coded to identify emergent themes, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of qualitative findings for further analysis and interpretation.

4. Findings

Survey Result
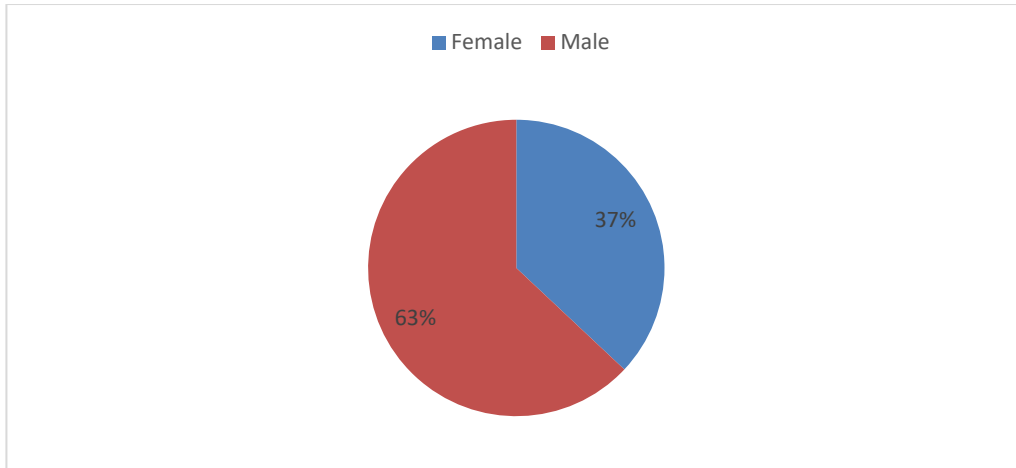
Demographic Information

Fig. 1 Sex of the Respondents

In exploring the demographics of our study participants, we found that the participation of male respondents is higher (63%) while 37% identified as female (Fig. 1), indicating a slight gender imbalance. This observation prompted us to conduct a sex-wise pivot table analysis to gain deeper insights into potential gender-based differences. Furthermore, the age distribution revealed that 56% of parents fell within the 35 to 44 age bracket, with 32% falling between 24 to 34 years old, suggesting a predominant presence of young parents. Notably, 81% of respondents were currently employed, indicating a high level of workforce engagement within the surveyed population.

Childcare experience of the city parents

Our investigation into the childcare landscape of Dhaka city discovered a gruesome crisis in the quality of care and available options. While grandparents' care emerged as the preferred choice for many, there is a shortage of such care only 64% of parents had access to this form of support (Fig. 2). Conversely, housemaid care, although utilized by 18% of parents, was met with notable dissatisfaction due to perceived inadequacies in caregiving skills and knowledge (Fig. 3). The utilization of daycare facilities remains notably low, with only 2% of parents enrolling their children in such programs. Consequently, a considerable portion of respondents (16%) did not find any viable non-parental childcare alternatives, resulting in a significant caregiving vacuum.
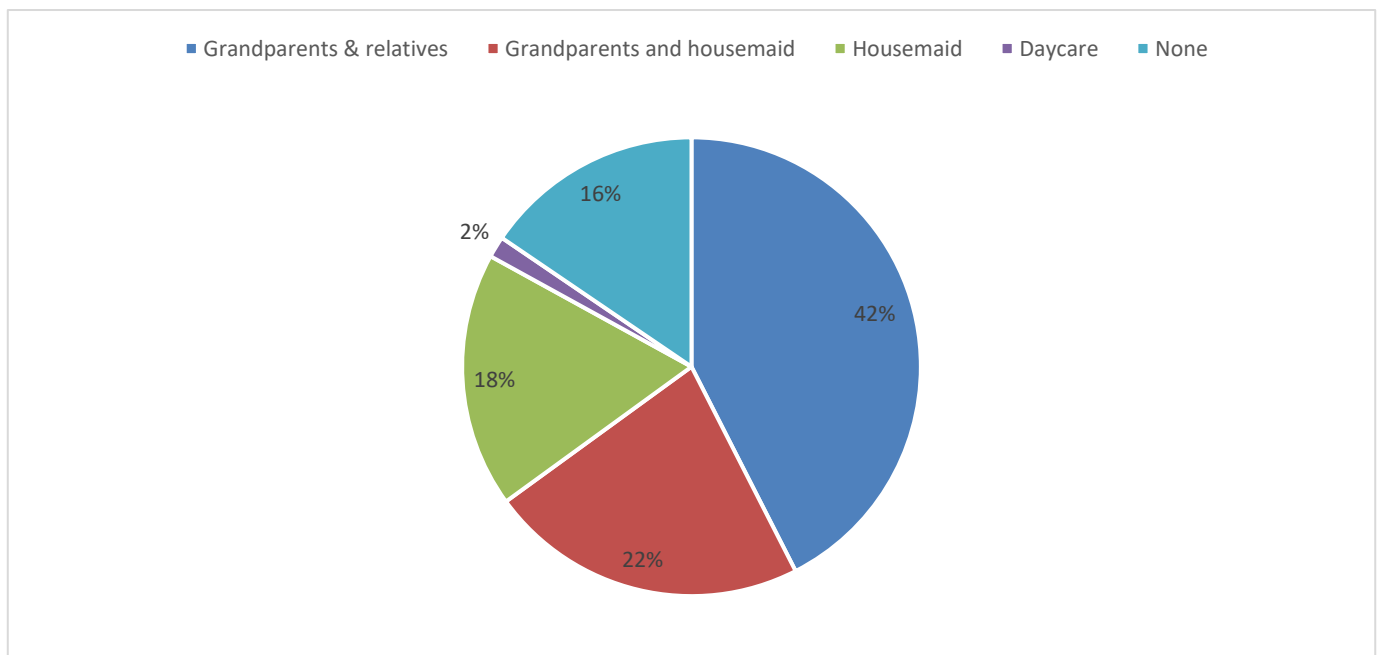

Fig. 2 Types of Available Non-Parental Caregivers at Daytime in the absence of parents
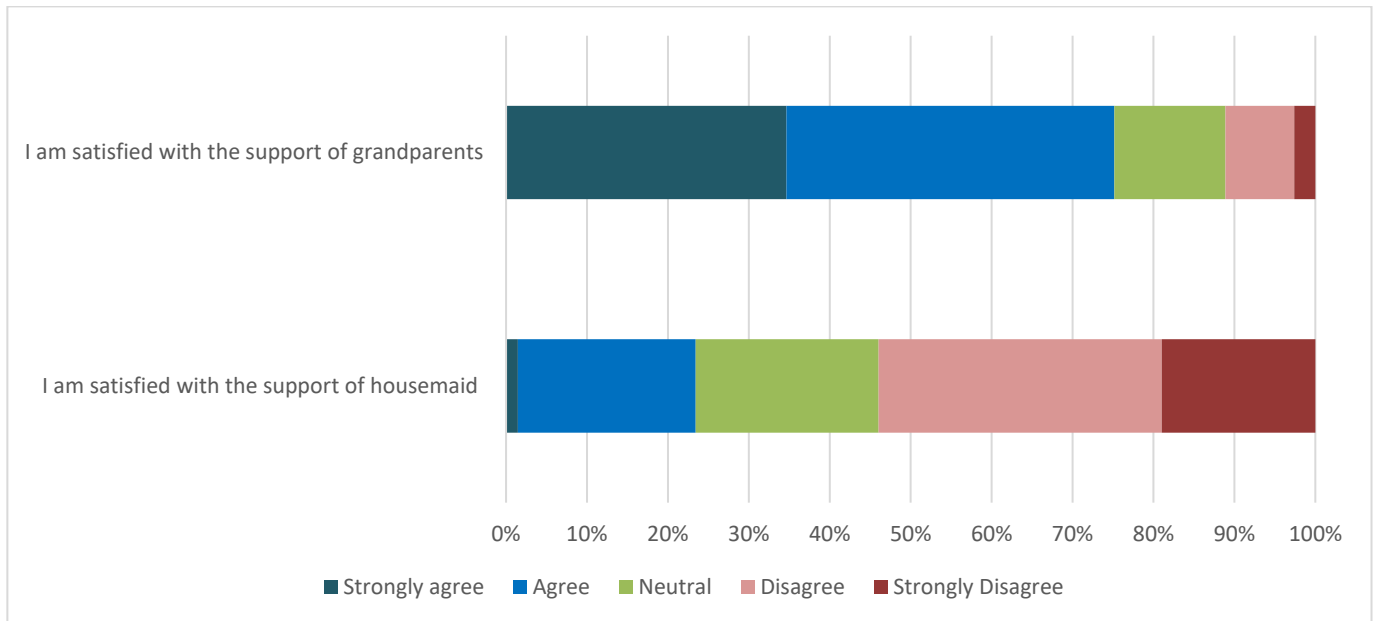
Fig. 3 Parents' Satisfaction with Non-parental Family Caregivers

Knowledge and skills of caregivers

Fig. 4 shows that 50% of parents dismissed that housemaid have caregiving knowledge and skills while 15 parents thought the opposite. Comparatively, more parents consider that grandparents have knowledge and skills in caregiving.
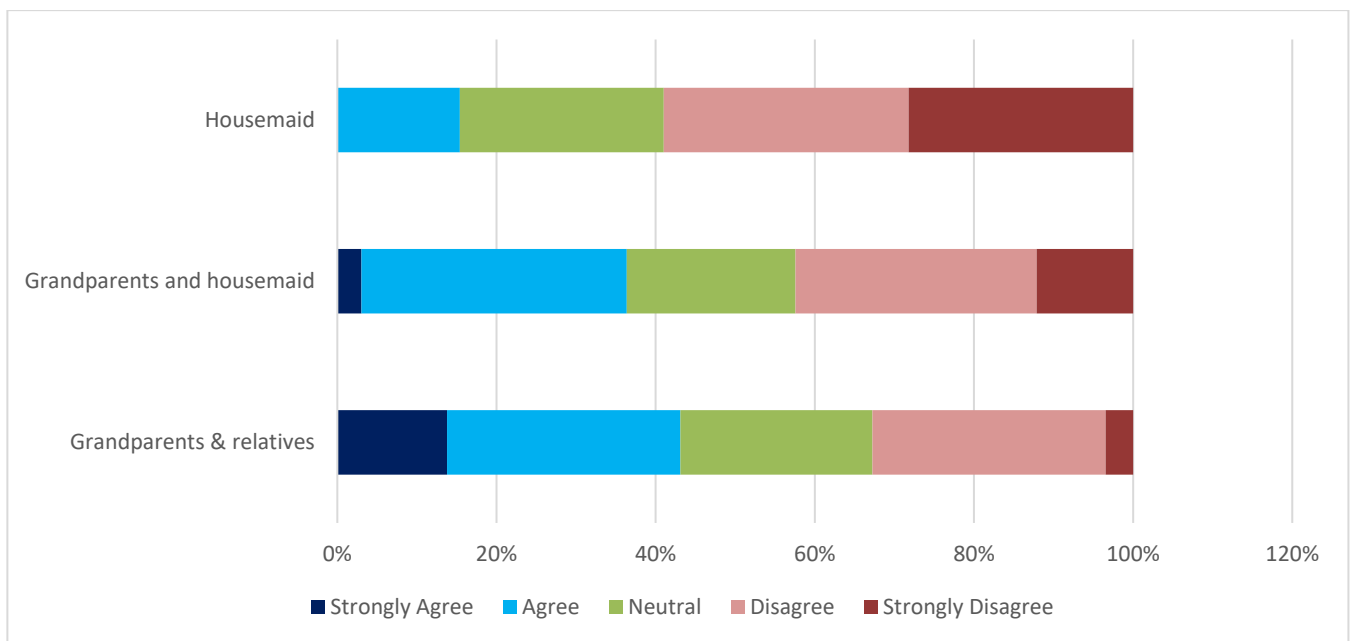

Fig. 4 Parent's Opinion About the Knowledge and Skills of Caregivers

In addition, Spearman's rank correlation was computed to assess the relationship between caregivers' knowledge and skills and child development. It found a strongly positive and significant correlation between the two variables, r (195) = .71, p <.01 The above analysis showed a positive and significant relationship between knowledge and skilled caregivers and child development.

Child interaction with society

The findings identified some factors linked with a child's interaction with society. Among those factors are the company of expert adults, interaction with peers, and the use of toys (Fig. 5). Through Spearman rank correlations presented in Table 1, the study examined the associations between different aspects of child interaction, revealing their

strength and direction in influencing child development. Results indicate moderate positive relationships between children's interactions with expert adults and peers ($\rho=0.42$), with expert adults and toys ($\rho=0.37$), and with peers and toys ($\rho=0.35$).

These associations are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), suggesting a high level of confidence. The analysis offers insights into parental perceptions of child interaction and the contributing factors therein.
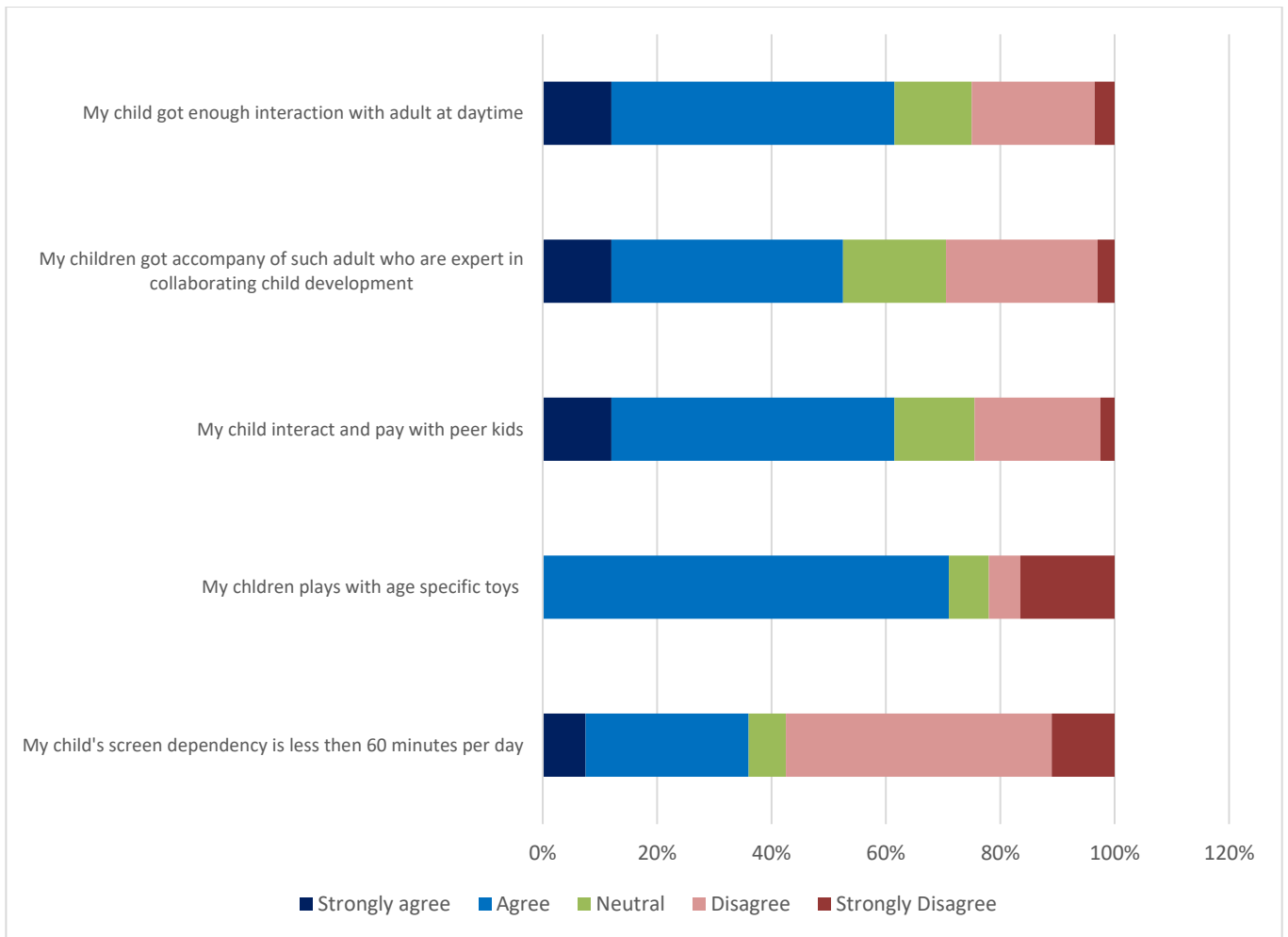

Fig. 5 Children's Interaction with Adults, Peers, and Society

Table 1 Spearman Correlation Coefficient on The Child Interaction and Caregivers' Knowledge and Expertise

	Interaction with exert adult	Interaction with peers	Interaction with toys
Interaction with exert adult	1		
Interaction with peers	.42**	1	
Interaction with toys	.37**	.35**	1

Note. **correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed), *correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed).

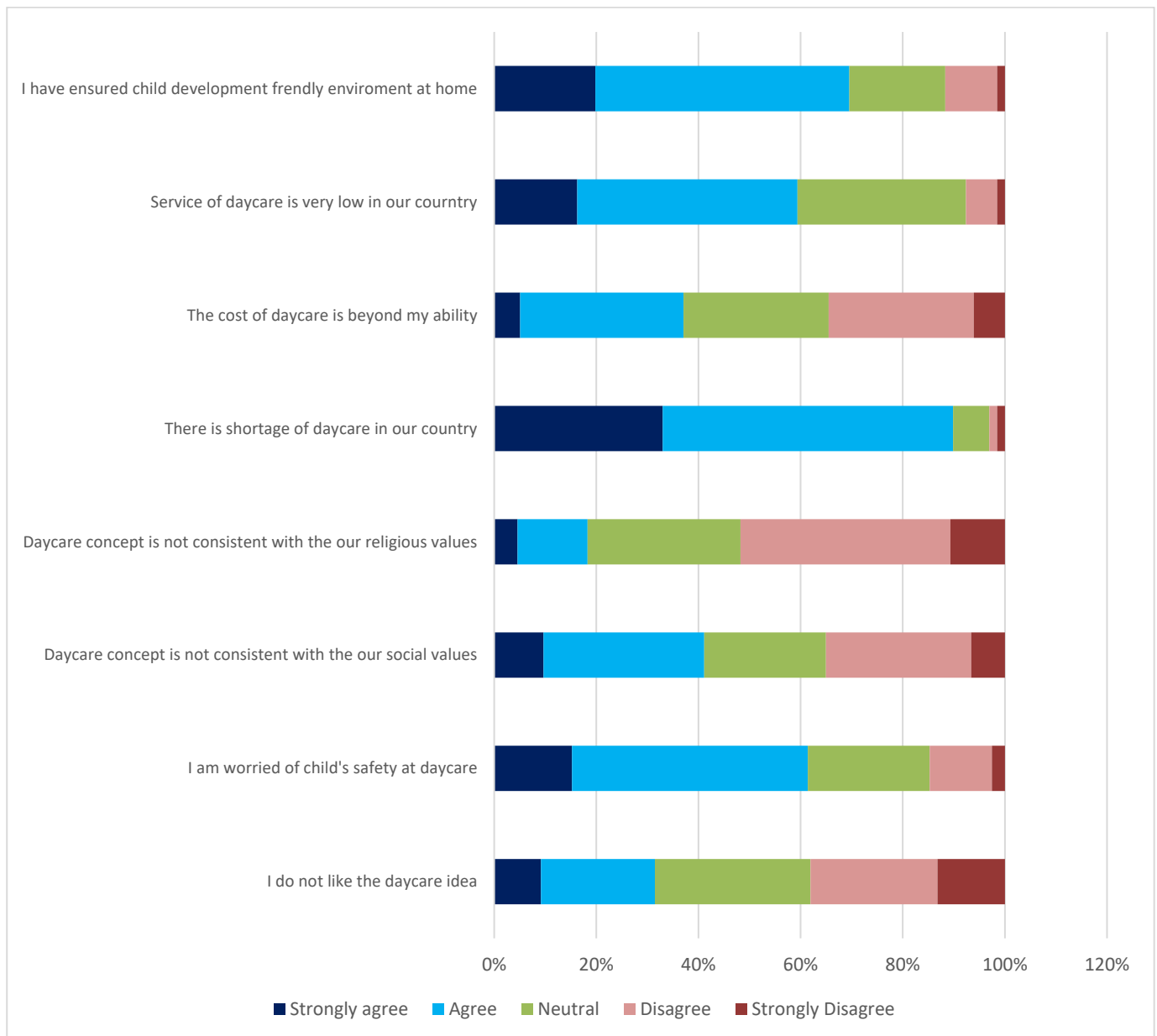*Cultural lag and gender issues relating to professional childcare practice*

Fig. 6 Reason for Not Choosing Daycare as an Option for Childcare

Our exploration uncovered several obstacles to daycare enrollment including a scarcity of daycare facilities, apprehensions surrounding safety, concerns regarding quality, and affordability challenges (Fig. 6). Notably, a significant number of respondents (70%) considered that they don't need daycare as they have a congenial home environment for childcare. Regarding daycare's adherence to religious and social values, a notable number of parents expressed dissatisfaction. Among them, 21% reported inconsistency with religious values, while 35% found daycare practices incongruent with social values.

Furthermore, our analysis unveiled that 31% of parents harbor reservations about the concept of center-based childcare. To delve deeper into the reasons behind this sentiment, we conducted a Spearman's rank correlation analysis to explore the relationship between parents' aversion to childcare and their other opinions. The results indicated a moderately positive and significant correlation between parents' reluctance to embrace childcare and their concerns regarding child safety ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$), as shown in Table 2. This correlation highlights the intricate interplay between parental perceptions of safety and their overall acceptance of formal childcare arrangements.

Table 2 Spearman Rank-Order Correlations Between parents' disliking of childcare and parents' child safety concern

	Disliking of daycare	
Child safety concern	.42*	

Note. *P< .05

The finding identified gender differences in the parental perception of daycare. Fig. 7 shows that 60% of female respondents dismissed the statement that daycare is not consistent with social values, while 21% of males did it. Furthermore, Fig. 8 shows that 38% of male respondents do not like the daycare idea, while 20% of female respondents dislike it.
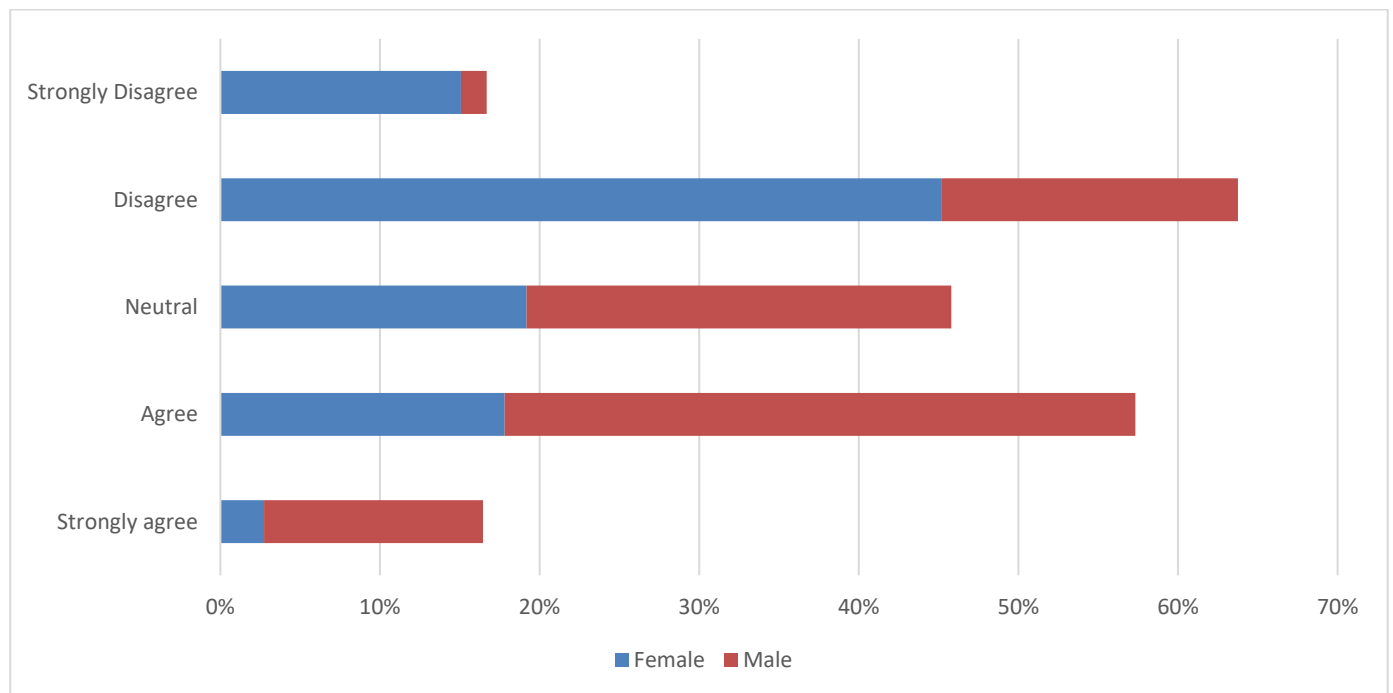

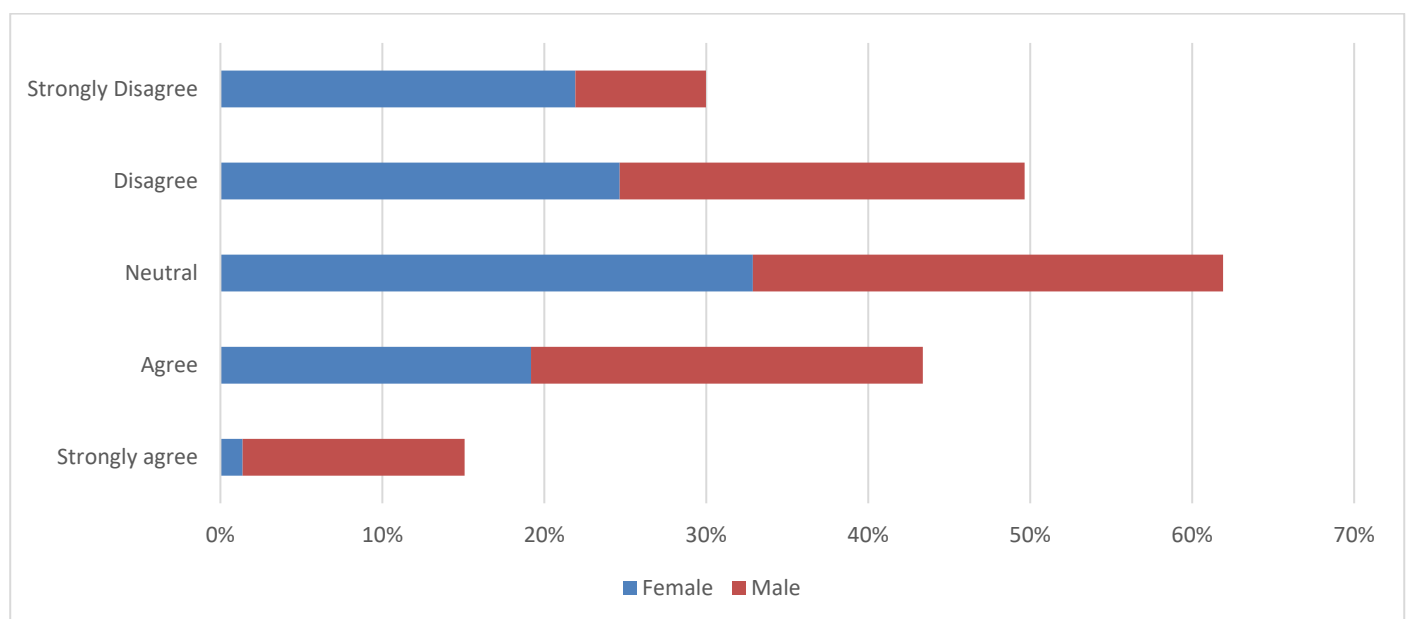**Fig. 7 Daycare System Is Not Consistent with Social Values**

Fig. 8 I Do Not Like the Daycare Idea: Gender Perspective

A Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between parents' opinions of social values and religious values. There was a moderately positive and significant correlation between the two variables, r (195) = .54, p <.05 (see Table 3. It indicates that religious values play a role in shaping social values.

Table 1 Spearman Rank-Order Correlations Between Parents' Opinion of Social Values and Religious Values

	Social Values	
Religious Values	.54*	

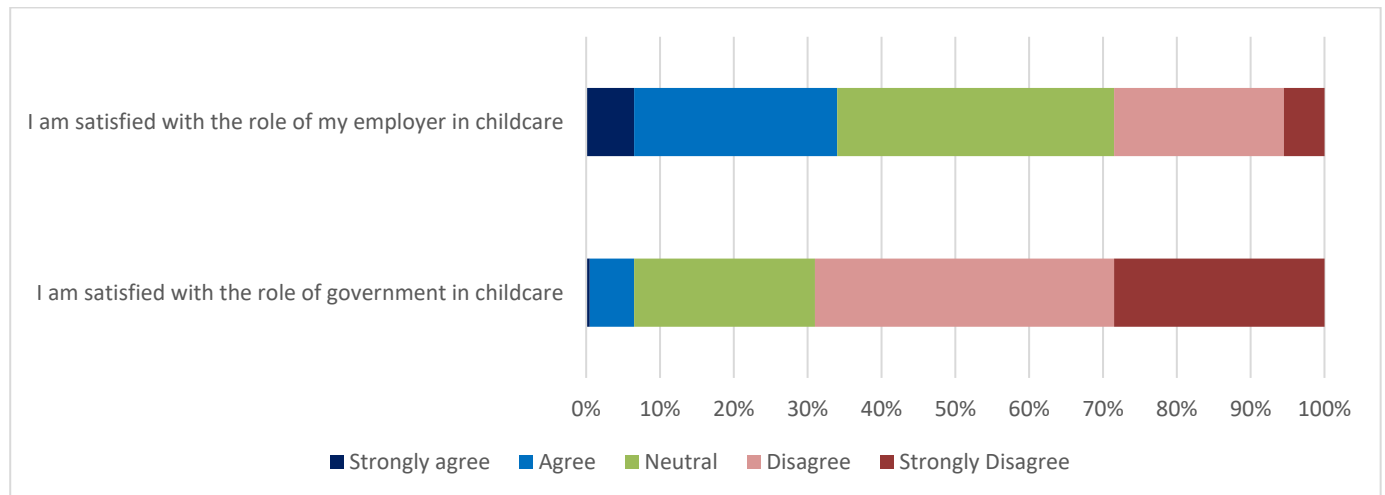Note. *P< .05

Role of government and employer

Fig. 9 Role of Government and Employer in Facilitating Childcare

A critical assessment of the government and employer roles in childcare provision highlighted widespread dissatisfaction among parents, particularly regarding the government's inadequate support and regulatory frameworks (Fig. 9). Gender discrepancies were once again evident, with female respondents expressing greater dissatisfaction with both governmental and employer support for childcare initiatives (Fig. 10).
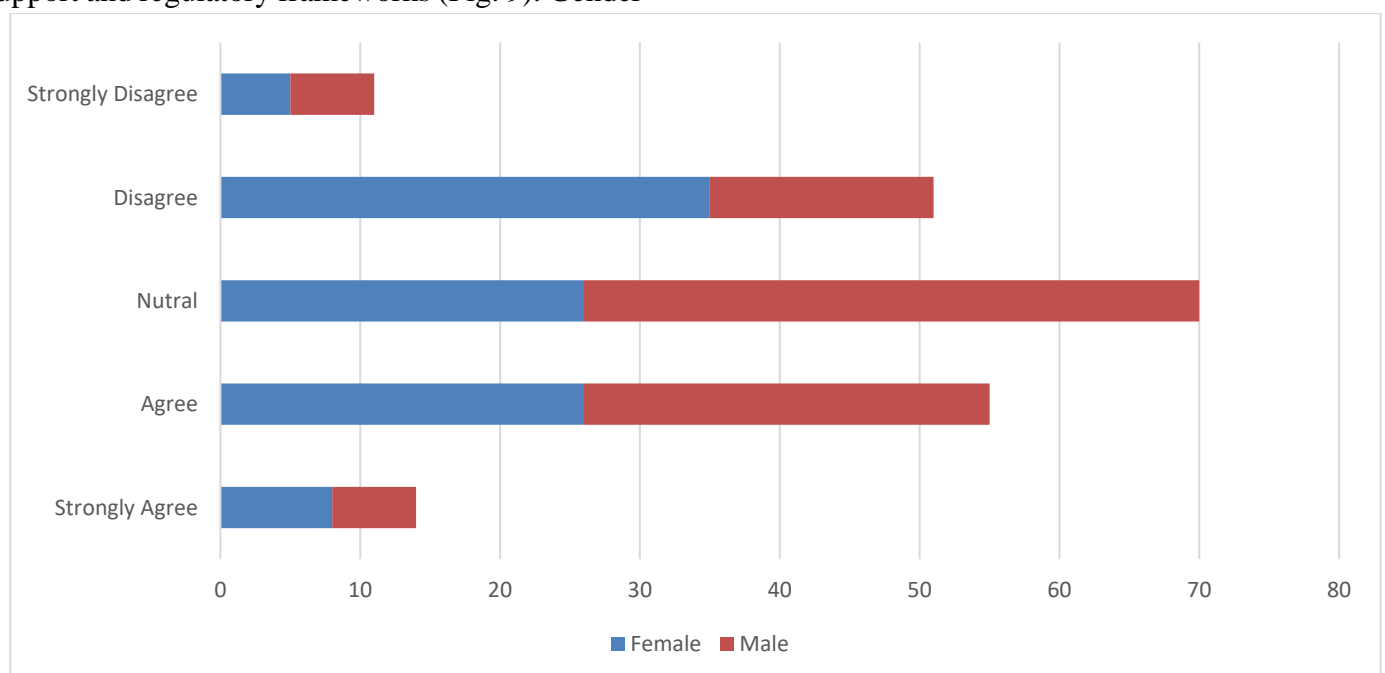

Fig. 10 Gender Perspective of Parents' Satisfaction on the Role of Government

Interview Result

The parents' experiences with different childcare arrangements varied significantly. Parents initially expressed satisfaction with grandparent care due to familial trust and proximity. However, concerns arose regarding the grandparents' lack of expertise in child development, leading to suboptimal learning experiences. Further, exclusive grandparents care offers adult-only interaction if the child does not have any siblings or cousins. While grandparents provide sincere care, their involvement in household chores may detract from the quality of childcare.

Housemaid care was perceived as detrimental to children's development, characterized by inadequate supervision, poor sanitation management, reliance on screens for entertainment, and safety concerns. Parents viewed housemaid care as a last resort, lacking the expertise and training necessary for optimal childcare.

Parents utilizing daycare services expressed satisfaction with the structured environment and opportunities for socialization and skill development for their children. However, concerns were raised regarding the lack of outdoor space, transparency in communication with parents, and an overemphasis on discipline rather than enjoyment.

The daycare administrator highlighted the challenges of running a daycare center in Bangladesh, citing the absence of licensing authorities and government support. Lack of regulation contributed to negative societal perceptions and hindered the expansion of quality daycare services. Recommendations included government incentives and regulatory bodies to promote the growth of daycare facilities.

Discussion:

The study revealed a significant trend in the urban childcare landscape, wherein parents' preferred non-parental caregiving network provided by grandparents has diminished. This finding corroborates previous research highlighting the shrinkage of familial care networks within Bangladesh over recent decades (Islam, Rashid, & Hossain, 2016). Consequently, many city-dwelling parents have resorted to reallocating caregiving responsibilities to their domestic workers, often alongside their existing household duties. Compared to that, the utilization of daycare facilities remains notably low among this demographic. This disparity underscores the substantial challenges faced by urban parents, with a striking 16% reporting a lack of viable non-parental caregiving options for their children, indicative of a profound childcare crisis in Dhaka. Elsey et al. (2020) identified this situation as a childcare vacuum within the urban landscape of Bangladesh.

The data indicates that despite the declining availability of grandparents' care, parents express higher satisfaction with childcare provided by grandparents. This finding resonates with the research of Zhang et al. (2020), which found that grandparents' care is the next-best choice in Bangladesh in the absence of parental care. Grandparents, by virtue of their familial ties, are perceived as the most trusted caregivers. However, the level of satisfaction with grandparents' care is intricately linked to their proficiency in caregiving, the child's social interaction with peers, and engagement with toys.

In search of alternatives, parents assign domestic workers to the caregiving role, but their services are less preferred due to their lack of skills and knowledge in childcare. A parent claimed that his child's delayed development happened due to his housemaid's inability to provide home stimuli to his child, as Hamadani et al. (2010) found that poor stimulation in the home is one of the main factors affecting child development in developing countries.

Despite such challenges in traditional childcare networks, parent's extreme apathy to daycare is noticed, only 2% of parents enrolled their children in formal daycare. There is a quality issue at daycare centers as well as sociocultural and gender issues that underlie such reluctance on the part of parents. Daycare facilities face concerns related to safety, quality, and affordability, while societal concerns

relate to gender perspectives, social norms, and religious values. Further, a significant portion of parents, comprising one-third of the sample opine that they don't like the daycare idea from the outset. We found that such parental perception of daycare is moderately associated with their apprehensions regarding child safety.

The finding contrasted with Zhang et al. (2020) as they identified the social image of daycare and parents' familiarity with it as the reasons. The contrast appeared because our research asked different questions. We asked, "why do parents not send their kids to daycare centers?" while they asked, "what drives parents to consider daycare as a childcare option?" (Elsey et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020), however, identified a shortage of daycare and affordability of parents as the main reason that supports our findings. However, they highlighted the affordability issue because they researched low-income families. On the other hand, we researched a sample who fell into middle-income groups.

The theoretical framework of this research stipulated that children's interaction with more knowledgeable others (MKOs) enables them to learn better. This is reflected in the findings of the study. It found that the caregivers' knowledge and skills and child development positively correlate with a strong p-value. Further, it identified a statistically significant moderate correlation between the company of adults, interaction with peers, and use of toys. It indicated that parents' perception of quality child interaction and satisfaction with caregivers is linked with children's exposure to peers and toys.

We notice gender differences in the perception of parents, specially toward formal daycare. Most female respondents (60%) rejected the notion that daycare contradicts social values, whereas only 21% of males held this view. Similarly, male respondents disliked daycare almost twice as much as female respondents, indicating that female respondents held a more supportive opinion of daycare.

A notable portion of parents identified that social and religious values disapprove the center based

formal caregiving idea. There is a significant correlation between these two values, suggesting that religious values have a significant influence on social values.

This aligns with literature, notably the study by Islam, Rashid, and Hossain (2016), highlighting the underutilization of labor laws mandating daycare facilities in organizations with over 40 female employees. Despite the recent childcare legislation, there's a significant oversight: no specific authority is assigned to register and monitor daycare centers (Child Daycare Law, 2021). This lack of regulatory oversight raises concerns about the effectiveness of childcare policies

Dissatisfaction with the role of government and employers is maximum. This observation aligns with literature, notably the study by Islam, Rashid, and Hossain (2016), highlighting the underutilization of labor laws mandating daycare facilities in organizations with over 40 female employees. Despite the recent childcare legislation, there's a significant oversight: no specific authority is assigned to register and monitor daycare centers (Child Daycare Law, 2021). This lack of regulatory framework raises concerns about the efficacy of childcare policies and their ability to address the needs of working parents. Moreover, it's notable that mothers tend to exhibit higher levels of dissatisfaction compared to fathers, reflecting a gendered dimension in the experiences of parenthood.

The research findings significantly contribute to the childcare literature in several ways. The study shifts the focus from developed to developing countries, providing valuable insights directly from parents and daycare administrators. Secondly, the study offers crucial policy implications for countries like Bangladesh, where childcare primarily operates within informal sectors. Importantly, it can guide the parents and daycare administrators of developing countries to make informed decisions.

However, it's important to acknowledge certain limitations encountered during the study, notably constraints related to time and budget. These limitations constrained the scope of the research,

restricting the analysis to correlations rather than exploring causal relationships. Future research endeavors could overcome these constraints, delving deeper into causal relations to establish a more robust foundation for decision-making in childcare policy and practice.

Conclusion:

This research sheds light on the evolving landscape of urban childcare in Bangladesh, revealing a crisis in both family care networks and formal daycare setups. The absolute reliance on grandparents as primary non-parental caregivers underscores the challenges. Their decreasing availability necessitates alternative solutions, often involving domestic workers. However, dissatisfaction with domestic workers' childcare capabilities is evident, with concerns raised about their impact on child development.

Interestingly, despite the growing need for childcare solutions, formal daycare enrollment remains strikingly low among urban parents, citing concerns ranging from safety and affordability to sociocultural and gender norms. The study highlights the complex interplay between parental perceptions, societal values, and childcare options, with gender differences notably influencing attitudes towards daycare.

Moreover, the research underscores the inadequacies in childcare policies and regulatory frameworks, particularly in monitoring daycare centers and enforcing labor laws. The dissatisfaction with government and employer support further accentuates the need for comprehensive reforms to address the childcare crisis effectively. Overall, this discussion underscores the urgency of addressing the childcare crisis in urban areas, emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts among policymakers, employers, and caregivers to ensure the well-being and development of children in Bangladesh and beyond.

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