

THE IMPACT OF MOTHERS' EMPLOYMENT ON THE NUTRITIONAL STATUS
OF PRESCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

By

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Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

in the

POSTGRADUATE INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE

of the

UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA
PERADENIYA

JUNE 2005



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Abstract

The overall trend towards increased economic participation of women has occurred in Sri Lanka and seems likely to continue given the recent shift to increasing number of export –led, open market oriented economy in the country. Women’s participation in the informal and formal labour force has positive as well as negative effects especially to young children. While improvements in income and autonomy of mother to direct family resources towards children bring positive effects, concurrent economic activities and childcare may be incompatible. The net effect of responsible factors may determine the nutrition of the young children of employed mothers. The present study aimed to assess the impact of mothers’ employment on the nutritional status of children of preschools in Kurunegala municipality.

Four hundred preschool children aged 3 - < 6 years were selected by stratified random sampling to represent low, middle and high-income groups. Information on mothers’ employment and childcare time were collected using self-administered questionnaire and activity recall respectively. The anthropometric measurements (weight, height, mid upper arm circumference & skin fold thickness) were used to determine the nutritional status of the children. Information on nutrient intake and frequency of food consumption were collected using 3-day diet diary and food frequency questionnaire respectively. Blood hemoglobin concentration of a sub sample of the subjects was determined. Income tertiles were determined based on the total family income.

The average care time of employed mothers was significantly lower than that of unemployed mothers ($p < 0.05$). Monthly family income of employed mothers was significantly higher than that of unemployed mothers. Children of employed mothers received significantly ($p=0.000$) higher percentage of mother substitute care from grandparents than that of children of unemployed mothers.

When consider low and high care time groups, significantly ($p = 0.001$) higher percentage of mothers was employed in low -care time group than the high-care time group. Monthly family income of households in low-care time group was significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher than that of high-care time group. The children in low- care time group received significantly ($p=0.000$) higher proportion of mother substitutes care from grandparents than that of high-care time group.

Except mean height, all other anthropometric measurements and nutritional indices were not significantly different between employed and unemployed groups. There was no significant difference in the nutritional status of the children in high-care time and low-care time groups. There was a significant effect of household income on anthropometric measures and indices and nutrient intakes of children, with favourable nutritional status in high-income group. Mean intake of energy, carbohydrate, fat, niacin, vitamin C, and percentage of energy derived from carbohydrate and protein were significantly below the RDA and, calcium, iron and percentage of energy derived from fat were significantly above the RDA for the whole group as well as employed and unemployed groups. Children of mothers who spend greater time on childcare had

higher energy intake from carbohydrates and lower calcium intake compared with those who spend lesser time on childcare. The odds of a child becoming underweight, stunted or wasted did not vary significantly by mothers' employment status although the income and paternal education were significant independent factors contributing to nutritional status.

In conclusion, there is no significant effect of maternal employment on the nutritional status of preschool children aged 3 to <6 years. Majority of the children do not meet the RDA for energy carbohydrates, niacin, and vitamin C, irrespective of the mothers' employment status. Household income and paternal education were independent variables determining the nutritional status of children. It can be speculated that mother substitute childcare system adopted by the studied families may have masked any effect of mothers' employment on the nutritional status children.