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Support for Childcare Services in Penang for Broad Socioeconomic Benefits

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A pilot survey has been conducted by PWDC and Penang Institute to collate perceptions and to investigate the needs of childcare services in the state. A total of 143 respondents share their perspectives on family challenges, childcare needs, and childcare challenges.
- Most respondents' current and preferred childcare services are private childcare centres, where reliability and safety are the main reasons for choosing said childcare service. In addition to that, affordability is stated as the biggest challenge for the B40 families, while M40 and T20 families struggle more with issues of safety and reliability.
- Notably, Penang saw for the first time an increase in female labour force participation being significantly higher for the 35-39 age cohort than for the 30-34 age cohort, for the year 2021. Whether this is an anomaly or the beginning of a trend remains to be seen.
- Universal accessibility to a diverse range of childcare options contributes to families' ability to focus on career development, which in turn provides them with financial security and stability, thus ensuring and enhancing a child's healthy development.
- Women are often the ones who bear the responsibilities of childcare, care work, and domestic duties. This leads to them giving up their careers for the sake of the family. Providing them with access to affordable childcare is the proven way to increase participation of women in the labour force, which in turn undoubtedly benefits the general economy.
- Recommendations made are from the angles of investigating the possibility of increased subsidies, enhancing the safety and reliability of childcare services, forming more public-private partnerships (PPPs), improving the quality and credibility of childcare services, and refining access to information.

Introduction

A child's formative years are crucial to their development path. As such, childcare and early childhood education are essential tools in ensuring that a child's early development remains healthy and robust. Childcare and early-childhood education centres assist children in developing language and mathematics pre-literacy skills, as well as social, emotional and communication skills.

Universal accessibility to childcare and a diverse range of childcare options play their part in ensuring that parents, particularly women, can pursue employment opportunities that contribute to the family's financial security and stability. Affordable childcare allows women to work, and increased women employment rates bring positive spillover effects on economic development and reduces the gender wage gap.

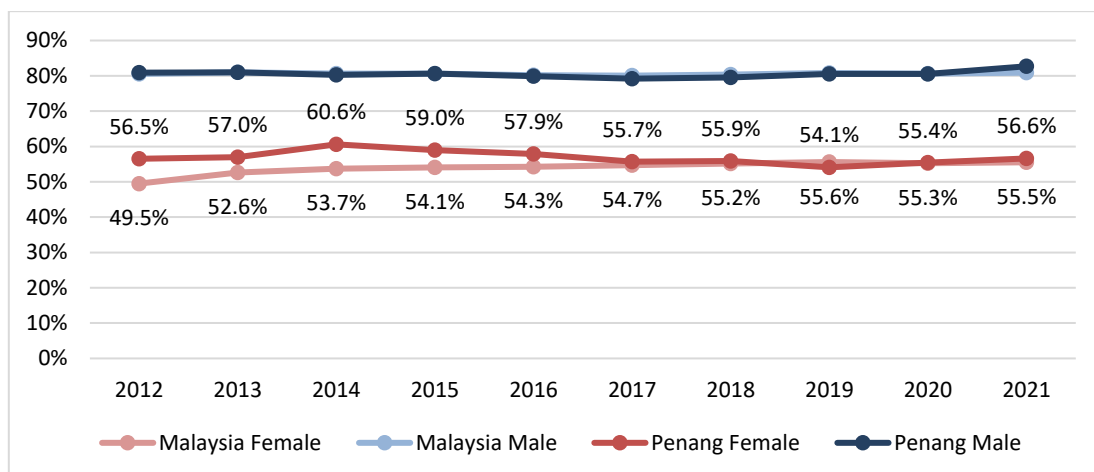
Investment in the children's formative years is vital in children being able to benefit socially and economically throughout their lifetime.

Female participation in the labour force

The participation of women in the workforce is a significant contributor to a country's economic development. In addition to creating positive economic impacts, the participation of women contributes diversity, creativity, and unique voices to the labour force. Although women in the labour force have been increasing steadily over time, their percentage remains significantly lower than that of their male counterparts.

In Penang, the participation rate of women in the workforce has been consistently higher than the national rate. In 2021, the national rate for this was 55.5%, while Penang's was 56.6% (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Labour force participation rate by gender, Malaysia and Penang, 2012 - 2021



Source: Labour Force Surveys, 2012 – 2021, Department of Statistics Malaysia.

It is important to note that for Malaysia and Penang, women labour force participation declines with age. For contrast, in high-income nations, the double-peak phenomenon for women's participation in the labour force has been observed, where women return to work after their child-bearing years. For

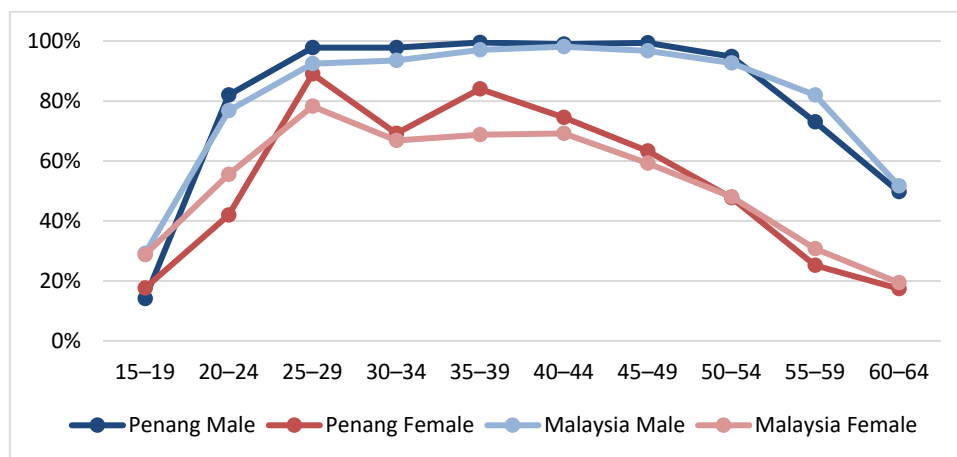
Malaysia and Penang, there is a single-peak phenomenon, with women’s labour force participation declining steadily after the age of 30. This suggests that Malaysian women are less inclined to return to work after childbirth and child-raising years.

However, an interesting observation was seen for 2021, where Penang experienced a double-peak phenomenon for the first time. The participation of women in the labour force increased for ages between 35 to 44 years old, after recording a decline for the age cohort of 30 to 34 years old (Figure 2). In previous years, as stated, women’s participation in the labour force usually saw a continual decrease from age 30 to 34 years onwards, after a peak in the late twenties. This double-peak phenomenon (for the year 2021) was also observed across all other states and territories, except for Kedah, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Perak, and Sarawak.

Notably, Penang’s increase in female labour force participation from 69.2% for ages between 30 to 34 years to 84% for ages between 35 to 39 years was the highest among all states and territories.

It remains to be seen whether the double-peak phenomenon is a temporary consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, where perhaps women were returning to work out of economic necessity due to employment and income lost during the height of the pandemic and lockdowns. The monitoring of female labour force participation in the next few years will yield further data on the nature of the trend.

Figure 2: Labour force participation by age, Malaysia and Penang, 2021



Source: Labour Force Survey 2021, Department of Statistics Malaysia.

Childcare responsibilities and domestic duties

As mentioned, the percentage of working men still significantly outweighs that of working women, and this is clearly depicted across all age groups except for ages between 25 to 29 years which are comparatively smaller (Figure 2). Unfortunately, the current societal and cultural norms still deem the work of caring for children and all associated domestic duties to be the responsibilities of women. Regrettably, women are the ones who find their career prospects hampered when they decide to start a family, and become the primary caregiver for the infant, and the toddler.

To illustrate this further, one may consider the impact and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Over the last two and a half years of the pandemic, working from home became the practice following lockdowns and reduced interaction. Although both parents were working from home, in most circumstances, it was found that childcare and domestic work continued to be borne by women (Lungumbu & Butterly, 2020).

With the closure of childcare centres and schools, the online learning and educating of the children mostly fell upon the shoulders of mothers. A much higher percentage of women were involved in home schooling compared to men. The women also shouldered the non-educational responsibilities such as cooking for and bathing the children (Hall, 2021). The pandemic further exacerbated the gender imbalances in childcare and domestic responsibilities, and it has been found that women were more mentally and emotionally strained during this period than men (Lungumby & Butterly, 2020).

A significant proportion of women see an end to their working lives if they do not return to work after childbirth and child raising. As it stands, some women do not choose to leave the workforce. Unaffordable childcare costs are one of the reasons why women leave the labour force – with the decision not to work being more economical for their families because they can save on childcare costs.

Studies have found that access to affordable childcare is an important factor facilitating young mothers' decision to work (Rammohan & Whelan, 2005). Furthermore, the participation rate of women in the labour force is found to be higher in countries with greater access to affordable and high-quality childcare, most notably in the Nordic nations of Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and so on (PWDC, 2013).

Therefore, if we want to encourage more women to return to work after childbearing and child raising years, one of the most important factors will be the optimal provision and affordability of childcare services. This is also vital when it comes to retaining women in the workforce. Affordable childcare also contributes to a healthy work-life balance for women and their families.

Childcare in Penang

Most childcare centres¹ and early childhood education centres in Penang are privately operated. Table 1 shows that there are currently a total of 119 registered childcare centres in Penang, where Seberang Perai Tengah has the highest number—24.4% of the overall number, while Seberang Perai Utara follows with 28 (23.5%). Meanwhile, Seberang Perai Selatan had the lowest numbers of registered childcare centres (13.4%).

The number of registered kindergartens is significantly higher. Timur Laut has the highest number of registered kindergartens. With 140 centres, the district accounts for 30.4% of all kindergartens in the state. As with childcare centres, Barat Daya and Seberang Perai Selatan have lower numbers of kindergartens, which is to be expected, based on the population distribution.

However, a significant number of unregistered childcare centres and kindergartens do exist. According to statistics provided by the Penang State Welfare Department, there are 60 unregistered childcare centres and 86 unregistered kindergartens in Penang.²

Aspiring childcare and early education providers have expressed concern about the complex procedure involved in setting up a centre; this requires approval from several departments and a lengthy waiting list process between departments. Undoubtedly this contributes to the proliferation of unregistered centres, which poses safety and security concerns.

¹ Childcare centres provide care for those aged between 0 to 4 years of age.

² Data by district is not publicly available.

Table 1: Number of registered childcare centres and kindergartens by district in Penang, 2022

District	Number of childcare centres	Number of kindergartens
Timur Laut	23	140
Barat Daya	23	67
Seberang Perai Utara	28	82
Seberang Perai Tengah	29	99
Seberang Perai Selatan	16	73
Total	119	461

Source: Penang State Welfare Department

The Community Development Department (KEMAS), under its Early Childhood Education programme, provides childcare and early childhood education services in the form of Taska (children’s nursery), for children aged between two to four years old, and Tabika (children’s preschool), for those aged between four to six years old. In Penang, there are 15 Taska and 265 Tabika in underdeveloped/rural locations or areas with a concentration of B40 families. Admission is only open to children with Malaysian citizenship.

The Ministry of National Unity also provides the services of Tabika Perpaduan for Malaysian children in the age range of four to six years old under their Early Childhood Education Plan 2021–2030. Currently, there are a total of 116 Tabika Perpaduan in Penang.

The Penang Women’s Development Corporation (PWDC) also formulated the Penang Childcare Policy and Action Plan in 2013. This was constructed to fulfill the following objectives:

- Children’s well-being and safety
- Women’s increased participation in the workforce
- Work and family life balance

The principal thrusts of the policy are identified as:

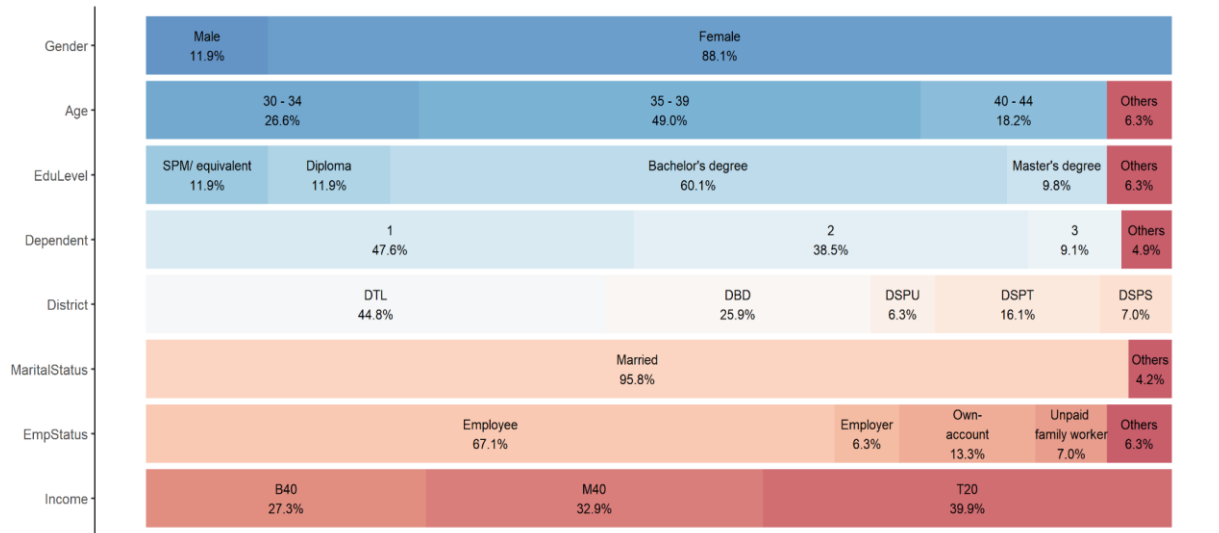
- Ensuring equitable access to safe and quality childcare
- Increasing workplace childcare centres
- Establishing community-based childcare centres
- Improving home-based care
- Assisting the private childcare service sector

Results and analysis of the childcare survey

Penang Institute and PWDC have jointly carried out a short survey looking at the challenges, childcare perceptions, and childcare needs of young families in Penang. The definition of young families refers to families with children aged 7 years and below, meaning children who need and use the services of childcare and early education centres.

The survey was conducted through an online platform. A total of 143 responses were collected. The demographics of the survey respondents are detailed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Demographics of survey respondents (N = 143)



Note: B40 = <RM5,000 (<RM4,850); M40 = RM,5000 - RM10000 (RM48,51 - RM10,970); T20 = >RM10,000 (>RM10970)

District wise, most of the responses were collected from Timur Laut (44.8%), followed by Barat Daya (25.9%). 88.1% of the respondents were women. A majority of the respondents were aged between 35 to 39 years (49%), followed by those aged between 30 to 34 years (26.6%). The survey unfortunately did not manage to capture parents younger than 30 years of age; this is a limitation to be considered.

Respondents who were married made up 95.8% of the total respondents. Otherwise, there were four divorced respondents and two single respondents. 47.6% were recorded as having one child, while 38.5% were families with two children. 9.1% had three children and the remaining 4.9% had more than four children.

Most of the respondents were considerably highly educated, with 69.9% at least holding a bachelor's degree. SPM-equivalent and diploma holders stood at 11.9%. 67.1% were gainfully employed, and 6.3% identified as employers. Own account workers stood at 13.3%.

In terms of income levels, 39.9% of the respondents belonged to the T20 group. 32.9% identified as M40, with the remainder 27.3% being classified as B40.

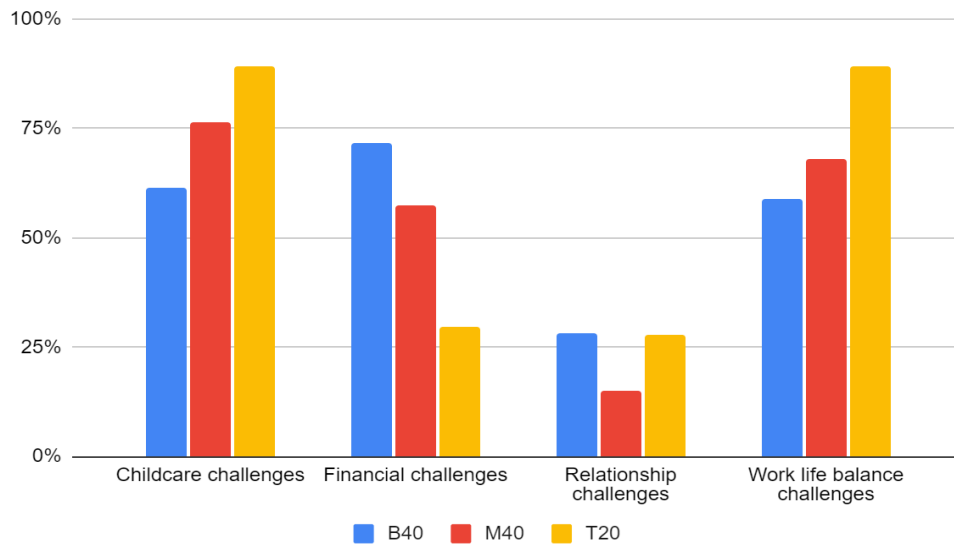
The analysis of the usage of childcare services, childcare needs and perceptions is carried out in accordance with the three different income groups.

Family challenges

Figure 4 shows that financial challenges were cited as the greatest difficulty for B40 families (71.8%), followed by childcare challenges (61.5%) and work-life balance challenges (59%). In contrast, M40 and T20 families cited childcare challenges as most concerning (76.6% and 89.4% respectively).

This was followed by work-life balance challenges, with 68.1% of M40 families and 89.4% of T20 families professing that they have difficulty achieving an optimal work-life balance. Financial challenges were present, but significantly lower when compared to B40 families (M40 = 57.5%; T20 = 29.8%).

Figure 4: Challenges of families by income group



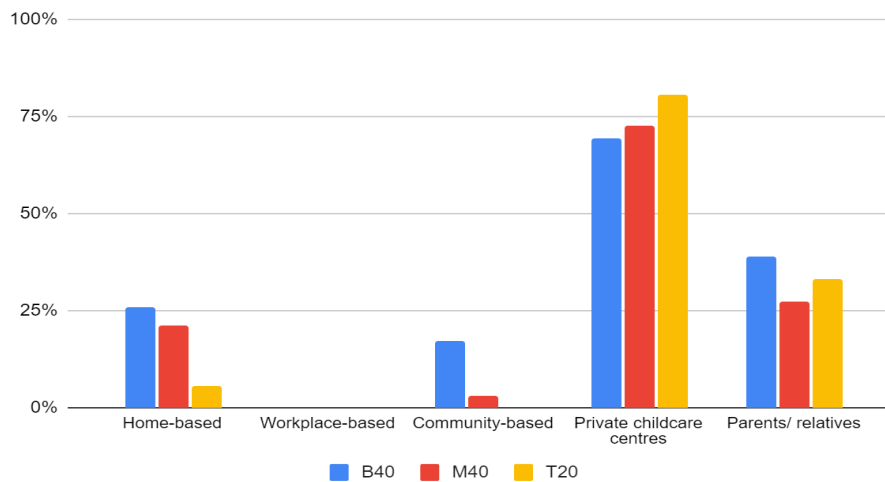
Childcare services: usage and perception

63% of the respondents answered yes to using childcare services. As per income class, it was found that while 59% of the B40 families engaged in childcare services, the percentage for M40 families and T20 families was markedly higher, at 70.2% and 63.2% respectively (see Appendix, Figure 1).

As for the type of childcare service used, private childcare centres were by far the most popular option. The survey found that 80.6% of T20 households chose to send their children to private childcare centres, followed by 72.7% of M40 families, and 69.6% of B40 families (Figure 5). Assistance from parents and relatives was the next best option, where 39.1% of B40 families were assisted by relatives, compared to 33.3% of T20 families and 27.8% of M40 families.

Additionally, M40 families and B40 families also engaged home-based child care (M40 = 21.2%; B40 = 26.1%), a service that was rarely taken up by the T20 families. B40 families also used the services provided by the community childcare centres (17.4%); this was not prevalent across the other two income groups.

Figure 5: Types of childcare services used by percentage and income class



Unsurprisingly, when it comes to preferred childcare options, private childcare centres remain the most selected option. As Figure 7 shows, 80.6% of T20 families chose private childcare centres as their most preferred option, whereas the corresponding percentages recorded for M40 families and B40 families were 72.7% and 69% respectively. Assistance from parents and relatives was again construed as the second most favoured option, with approximately one-third of the respondents selecting this option across all income groups.

Interestingly, the families chose workplace-based childcare as a preferred option, although a very small percentage of respondents made use of this service as per current situation. The survey showed that 30.2% of T20 families opted for workplace-based childcare, followed by M40 families (23.1%) and B40 families (20.7%). This suggests that companies and employers could consider providing childcare services at work.

Figure 7: Types of preferred childcare services by percentage and income class

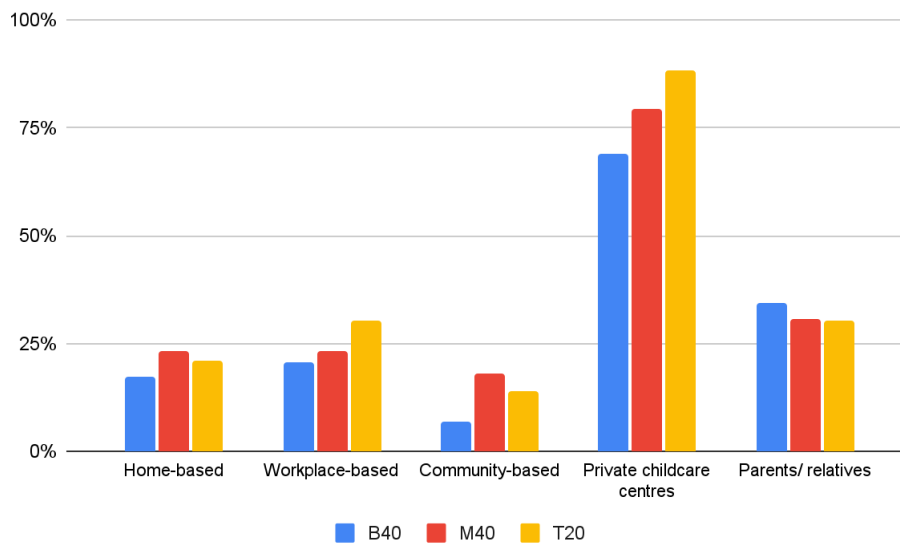
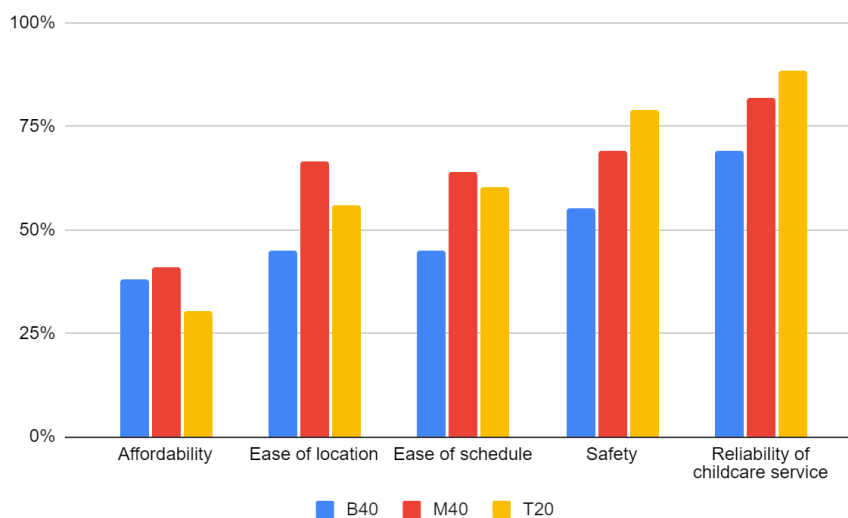


Figure 6 shows that the reliability of the childcare service was the most important factor for all families (B40 = 69%, M40 = 82%, T20 = 88.4%). Safety and security followed as the second most important deciding factor for the respondents. Comparatively, a bigger proportion of T20 families were depicted to be more concerned about reliability and safety.

The M40 families surveyed placed more importance on ease of location and ease of schedule when compared to the other two income classes. Affordability appeared to be the issue of least concerns, particularly for the T20 families.

Figure 6: Reasons for choice of preferred childcare by percentage and income class

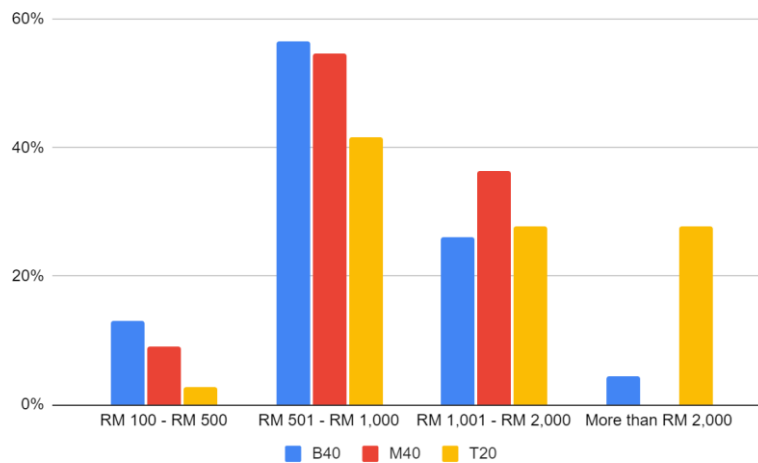


When it comes to fees for childcare services, it was found that most respondents pay a monthly fee ranging from RM501 to RM1,000 (Figure 8). Slightly more than half of all B40 (56.5%) and M40 families (54.6%) pay the aforementioned fee, followed by 41.7% of T20 families.

A bigger percentage of M40 families paid between RM1,001 to RM2,000 monthly (36.4%) when compared to T20 families (27.8%) and B40 families (26.1%). However, a significant percentage of T20 families spent more than RM2,000 on childcare monthly (27.8%).

We must note, however, that the level of childcare fees paid would differ according to the number of children in a family. The results are however analysed as total spending for childcare within a household.

Figure 8: Total monthly childcare fees paid by percentage and income class

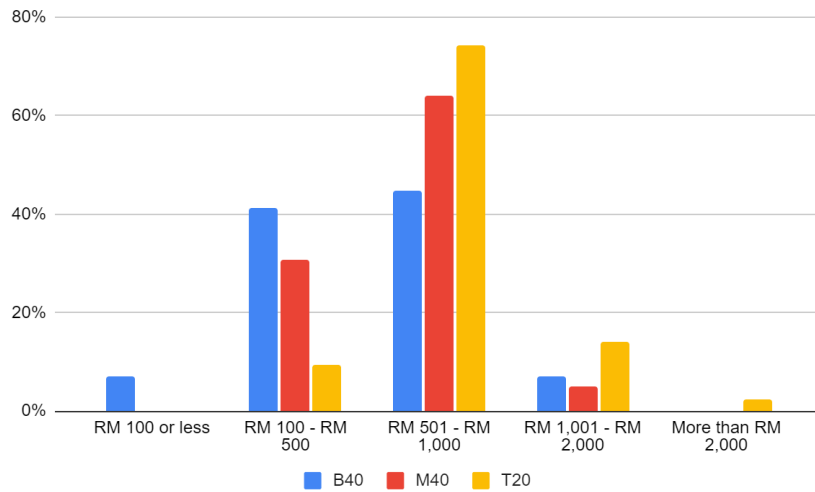


The respondents were also asked on the level of childcare fees they would be most comfortable paying. Figure 9 illustrates that a majority of the B40 respondents were paying between RM501-RM1000 per month for childcare services, but would prefer lower fees, at around RM100 to RM500 = 41.4% and RM501 to RM1,000 = 44.8%.

As for the M40 families, 64.1% stated that their preferred range of childcare fees was between RM501 to RM1,000. This signifies that M40 families are generally satisfied with their current level of childcare fees.

For T20 respondents, 74.4% indicating that as their preferred price for monthly childcare fees also lay between RM501 and RM1,000. The preferred price point of between RM100 to RM500 was the lowest among T20 families (2.78%), and predictably higher for M40 (30.8%) and B40 families (41.4%). T20 families are also more willing to pay higher prices when compared to the other two income groups.

Figure 9: Preferred monthly childcare fees by percentage and income class

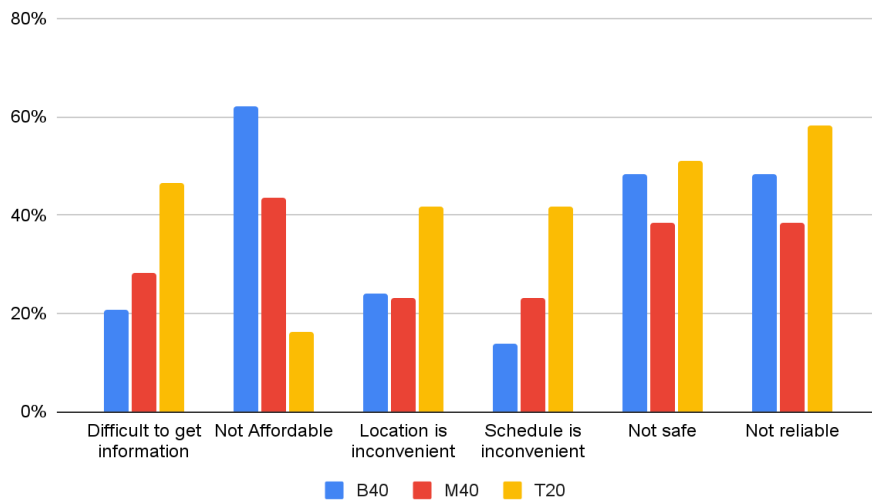


Challenges of childcare

Among the myriad of challenges, affordability was cited as the biggest challenge for B40 and M40 families, where 62.1% and 43.6% of the respondents respectively were of the opinion that the fees were not as affordable as they could have been (Figure 10). With a household income range of RM5,000, the majority of the B40 families were spending 10% to 20% of their household income on childcare (see Figure 7). As for the M40 respondents, it was found earlier that 64.1% of the families were happy with the fees paid (see Figure 9).

Affordability was a lesser issue with the T20 families, as they appeared to be much more concerned with the challenges of reliability (58.1%) and safety (51.2%). Inconvenient location and daycare schedule were also more persistent difficulties for T20 respondents when compared to the other two income groups. T20 families also seemingly faced more difficulties getting information regarding childcare services.

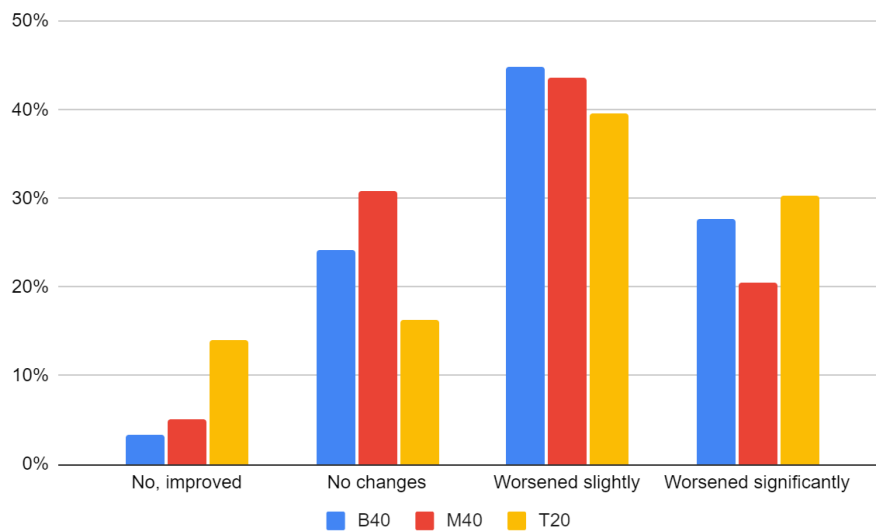
Figure 10: Percentage of challenges faced in securing childcare services by income class



In general, the respondents were of the opinion that childcare challenges had worsened due to the pandemic (varying levels of slightly or significantly) (Figure 11). With the unstable situation, parents were worried that their children were susceptible to infection in the childcare centres. Some respondents also stated their concerns on whether the childcare centres properly followed the Covid-19 sanitisation standard operating procedures (SOPs). Childcare during the pandemic lockdowns was also extremely difficult for some parents, as they had to work and supervise their children’s online classes at the same time.

More than half of the childcare service providers to M40 families cited the risk of Covid-19 infection as a major challenge, as children (at the time of the survey) were unable to get vaccinated. In general, all respondents were hesitant about sending their children to childcare centres, even though the need to work took precedence over the families’ concerns.

Figure 11: Perception of childcare challenges due to the pandemic by percentage and income class



Non-childcare users

Among the survey respondents, the families who did not use childcare services are as follows: 41% of B40 families, 29.8% of M40 families, and 36.8% of T20 families (see Appendix, Figure 2). More than 50% of the B40 and M40 families cited challenges that prevented them from using childcare, with 33.3% of the T20 respondents sharing the same opinion. Affordability, reliability, safety, and convenience were among the reasons given for the non-usage of childcare services.

More than half of the B40 and M40 respondents professed that they would use childcare services if these challenges did not exist, while 100% of T20 families would engage in childcare services if they did not face any difficulties.

The remainder of the respondents were those who professed that they took care of their children by themselves, with their own means.

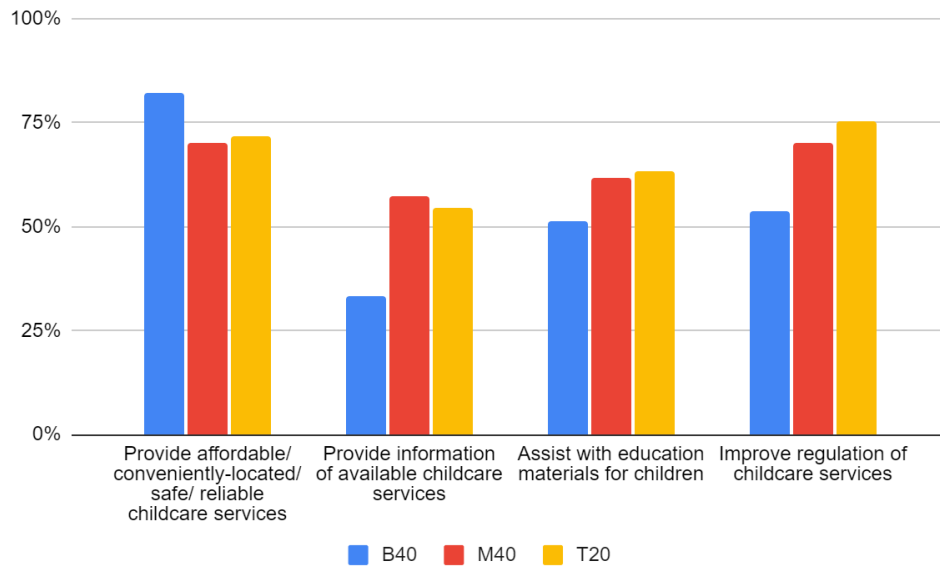
Government assistance

Figure 12 shows that a significant percentage of the respondents, most particularly B40 families (82.1%), hoped for the government to assist in providing childcare services that were safe, reliable, affordable, and conveniently located (M40 = 70.2%; T20 = 71.9%).

T20 families were also more concerned with the regulation of childcare services, with 75.4% of the respondents stating that they would like to see some improvement (M40 = 70.2%; B40 = 54.9%).

The survey also shows that more than 50% of the respondents would also like the government to assist with providing educational materials for the children, with this being slightly more important for M40 and T20 families. The latter was also more concerned with the availability of information on childcare services.

Figure 12: Preferred government assistance by percentage and income class



Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the survey and respondents' preferences when it comes to improving the accessibility and quality of available childcare services in Penang, the following recommendations are made, with mentions of related policies already in place:

1. Investigate and study the possibility of increasing childcare subsidies and/or other models of subsidies for low-income families

Current policies/actions in place:

- The State Government has established a Childcare Aid Scheme which provides an RM50 monthly childcare allowance for B40 families.

The provision of affordable childcare is rated highly when it comes to preferred government assistance. The B40 families cited the affordability of childcare services as the most difficult challenge, where some respondents suffering loss of income/employment due to the pandemic had exacerbated these financial challenges. A number of M40 families also raised similar concerns of loss of income affecting their perception of affordability when it comes to childcare services.

Subsidised childcare and/or childcare allowances are measures that are utilised by most countries as assistance to lighten the financial burdens of low-income families. One good example is Thailand's Social Security Fund (SSF) which provides a monthly childcare allowance and that was increased in 2019. Japan has made childcare and early childhood education free for households and legislated exemption from municipal taxes for activities covering the care and education of children aged zero to five.

Developed nations like Sweden and Denmark also utilise childcare subsidies to support families and increase the participation rate of women. In Sweden, children aged between three to six years of age are entitled to free childcare for up to 15 hours a week. The government of Sweden also provides a monthly child allowance, which is used by most parents to offset childcare costs.

In Denmark, Danish citizens and citizens of EU/EEA countries who are working in Denmark are entitled to subsidised childcare in a day-care facility every weekday, from the age of 26 weeks until the children reach the school-going age. The subsidy, which covers a minimum of 70% of the costs, is borne by the local authorities, and is given to the day-care centre and not directly to the parent.

The current study is a pilot study, and it is suggested that an in-depth study is needed on the financial challenges of childcare costs and accessibility focusing on B40 families and the lower spectrum of M40 families; this is to determine the best assistance for them and to investigate the optimal amount of subsidies and/or the type of subsidy models needed to ease their difficulties. In addition, the deliberation of subsidies needs to consider the locality of the centres, as costs may differ according to location.

2. Investigate the feasibility of building more public-private partnership (PPP) in providing affordable childcare and early childhood education

Current policies/actions in place:

- Taska D'Komtar, is under the purview of the state government and is administered by PWDC and operated by a private operator. Currently situated at Komtar, it is one example of a partnership, although not strictly a PPP, as PWDC is a government-linked corporation (GLC). Nevertheless, it is a partnership between two stakeholders aimed at providing affordable childcare for those who work for the state government.

- Tadika Whytehouse @ Tech Dome Penang is a partnership between the state government, Tech Dome and Whytehouse Education Group, and it aims to deliver affordable and quality early childhood education, primarily to the civil service.

Collaboration between the public and private sectors are seen as an important and viable strategy in addressing challenges and strengthening support systems in areas of development, among which are childcare and education. PPPs work to improve universal access to services, as well as enhance the quality of said services. The stakeholders in PPPs are encouraged to be diverse, for capturing the basic needs of the community.

It is suggested that the state government investigate the feasibility of such PPPs by putting out a call for proposals in developing affordable childcare services. The partners can include (but not be limited to) the state government, employers and companies, childcare providers and educators, health professionals, community and civic organisations as well as the families themselves. In addition to setting up facilities, multinational corporations (MNCs), especially, can be encouraged to provide childcare and early childhood education development grants as part of their corporate social responsibilities (CSRs).

The expertise and capacities of the stakeholders of PPPs can be applied accordingly, for example in areas such as management and operation, services and curriculum development, training of childcare providers and early childhood educators, and so on. Subsidies for low-income families, such as vouchers and reduced payments, should also be considered.

3. Improving the reliability, safety and regulation of childcare and early childhood education centres

Current policies/actions in place:

- All childcare centres are expected to follow the SOPs and guidelines on the safety of childcare centres (structural and operations) as established by the Ministry of Health, the Department of Welfare, and the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia.
- The state government currently provides grants to parties who are interested in setting up a childcare centre. A maximum yearly grant of RM 300,000, for the period of three years, is given to any party that is establishing a new childcare centre.³ Additionally, a RM 20,000 (max) grant (limited to RM 300,000 for three years) is provided for the upgrading of existing childcare centres. Executive Council papers on extending the grant to the upgrading of early childhood centres have also been submitted and are currently under review.

The reliability and safety of childcare and early childhood education centres rank highly on the respondents' list of concerns, especially on hygiene and Covid-19 SOPs. Parents have expressed fear of their children being susceptible to infection due to less-than-ideal Covid-19 hygiene practices at childcare centres; many have chosen not to use the services. Safety and reliability also rank highly among the reasons for parents choosing their preferred childcare service.

As a way to streamline all the safety practices for childcare and early childhood education centres, it is suggested that all the safety SOPs from the Ministry of Health, the Department of Welfare, and the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia collated and made available to all existing and future centres. This document should also include Covid-19 hygiene practices, as determined by the Ministry of Health. This will ensure all safety measures are communicated, and operators can be expected to adhere to these measures in order to obtain or maintain a license. In addition, future updates to SOPs should be communicated to all operators. parents

³ Mohd Rosli, S. (2 June, 2022). 187 unregistered childcare centres, kindergartens and elderly care centres in Penang, retrieved from <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/205163/EDISI/187-tadika-taska-dan-pusat-jagaan-warga-emas-tidak-berdaftar-di-Pulau-Pinang>

The adherence of childcare centres and early childhood education centres to the established SOPs should be monitored. Operators who violate the SOPs should be handled accordingly to maintain the safety and reliability standards, and their credibility.

4. Improving the quality and credibility of childcare centres and early childhood education centres

Current policies/actions in place:

- Preschooleducation.com is a paid subscription online platform that provides childcare operators, early childhood educators and parents with educational materials and modules. The platform receives endorsement from the state government and aims to improve the quality and accessibility of educational materials for young children. The state government also sponsored 1,000 memberships for the targeted group upon the platform's launch.

The quality of education at childcare centres and early childhood education centres is a matter of importance for parents. Research has shown that early education is imperative to a child's cognitive and social development.

Vietnam, for example, has launched the BaMi Programme⁴, which places importance on strengthening the professional development of teachers and school leaders in early childhood education (ECE) in the three provinces of Kon Tum, Quang Nam, and Quang Ngai. The programme's main objective is to enhance the development of the educators in process-orientated child monitoring and to address barriers to learning and participation.

The Chilean Ministry of Education, through a platform known as Aptus⁵, provides management and technical support to teachers on the use of the online platform and the development of online materials, teaching methods, evaluation, and how to gather feedback from students through surveys. It also aims to improve the educators' teaching skills, and enhance the quality of education.

The above are concrete examples and models that can be considered by the state government for improving the quality of childcare givers and early education educators, hence increasing the quality of childcare centres and early childhood education centres.

Short-term workshops and programmes can also be formulated, where best practices and practical skills can be shared.

Additionally, the findings of the survey show that more than 50% of the respondents would appreciate assistance with educational materials for their children. Some respondents expressed a wish for more structured content related to early education.

It is suggested that the state government help promote the PreschoolEducation.com platform among operators, educators, and parents. The materials from the platform can be translated and adapted in physical form to provide for in-person teaching. Sponsorships and subsidies can be channeled to lower-income families, as well as to childcare centres that cater to the lower income groups.

⁴ <https://vietnam.vvob.org/en/early-education-programme-17-21>

⁵ <https://www.aptus.org/>

5. Comprehensive information on location and availability of childcare centres and early childhood education centres to be made readily accessible to parents

Current policies/action plans in place:

- The Department of Welfare currently provides a list on their website on the number of available childcare centres in Penang, along with the addresses, sorted according to district and type of childcare service (home-based, institutional, community, and workplace).

The survey data illustrated that the respondents would appreciate more comprehensive information on the childcare services that are available to them. More than 40% of higher income families had struggled with obtaining information on childcare services. The other income classes also faced difficulties, but to a lesser degree. It has been a challenge for them to secure a childcare service where both location and schedule are convenient to the families.

It is suggested that the Department of Welfare undertake a more frequent process of updating the lists on the Department's website, so that parents can rest assured that the information they receive is the most updated. The availability and reliability of this resource should be made known to parents.

In addition, the state government should consider the feasibility of a mapping project detailing the locations of all registered childcare and early childhood education centres. Once completed, the information can be disseminated across the state via various platforms and mediums so that parents and families can access the information and make the most informed decision about choosing a childcare service that best suit their needs.

Conclusion

Given the findings of this survey, the principle stands, that universal access to affordable childcare services should be considered a right and not a privilege. Only with that can parents be confident that their children are safe and well-cared for while they work. It will also maximise the participation of women in the labour force, bringing substantial economic benefits to the state and the country.

Furthermore, and as a key point, accessibility to quality childcare is also highly beneficial to the social and cognitive development of the children.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Percentage of childcare services usage by income group

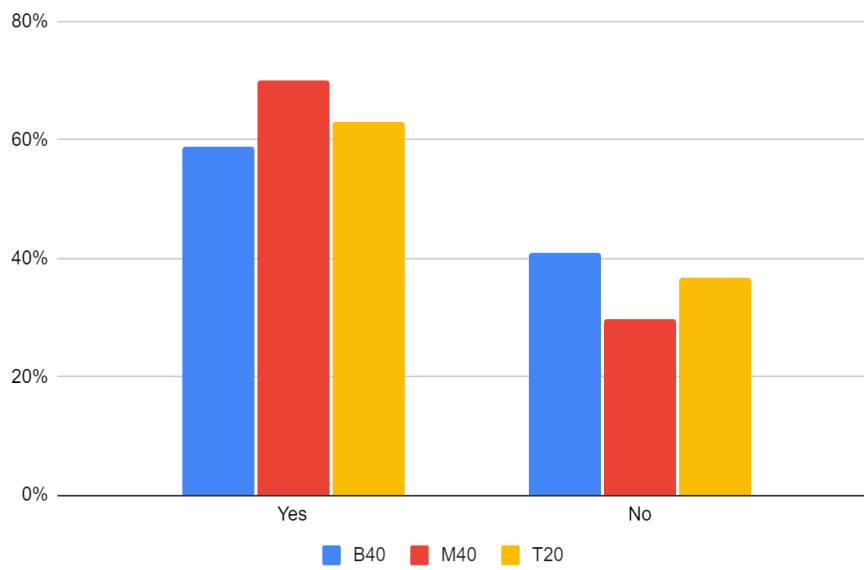


Figure 2: Existence of challenges in prevention of childcare usage by percentage and income class

