



How long will it take for employers to offer childcare centres?

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Siddiquatul Haque, a former employee of the Bangladesh Security Printing Corporation (Bangladesh) Limited, had to resign from her high paying job because she didn't have anyone to take care of her firstborn. Her husband was also a service holder and the couple lived in the city alone, meaning there was no one to take care of her child during the day.

At first, Haque thought her domestic help could also take care of the children but that didn't work out either. After a few days, she realised she had to give up her work for her children. A few years later, Haque moved abroad with her husband and the baby. But there, she found she could work as her office provided an early child care and development centre for working parents like her.

On the other hand, Nargis Shathi, a journalist of a leading daily newspaper, says if she had had daycare facilities at her office, she could have proven herself more professionally. Shathi, who is divorced from her husband, lived with her elderly parents after giving birth.

"After the end of my maternal leave, I had to rejoin the office when my baby was only six months old. My domestic help would feed her, play with her, take care of my parents, and do all the household chores. You cannot imagine the feeling of when you are fighting to meet deadlines at the office and your mother is calling you to say that your baby is constantly crying, not eating anything, or feeling unwell," she remembers.

"During my working hours, I would only think of when I could go home and play with her. Sometimes I wanted to go home early, but it was not possible most

of the time. In fact, other than serious problems at home, I couldn't tell my boss that I had issues with leaving my daughter for such long periods of time. Rather, I would blame myself thinking that if I told her (my boss) this too frequently, she might simply consider me an unprofessional employee," she says.

"If there was a childcare facility in my office, I could go see her whenever I had spare time on my hands or breastfeed her when necessary," she adds.

According to section 94 (1) of Bangladesh Labour Law 2006, every establishment having more than 40 workers must provide and maintain a suitable room or rooms for the use of children under the age of six years. These rooms should also provide adequate accommodation, lighting, ventilation and proper hygiene and must be conveniently accessible to mothers, heat-resistant, adequately furnished and well equipped.

However, the reality differs greatly from what the law states. Around 2 crore women work in different professions across the country (according to the 2016-2017 labour force survey) but there are few organisations which provide a proper childcare corner for working mothers (let alone single fathers).

Child rights activist Wahida Banu, the executive director of Aporajeyo Bangladesh Foundation, an organisation working for disadvantaged children and youth, sheds light on the importance of having an early childcare and development unit at the workplace. "According to my experience of working in different slums where we provide childcare facilities, I have found that when a child passes time at a daycare—plays with other children, engages in drawing or painting or singing, or receives pre-primary education—it becomes easy for him/her to do well in the next stage of life and s/he becomes a quick learner. The setting and the environment help them do well during school," she says.

Wahida also mentions that similarly, mothers who leave their young children at home with the domestic help or family members cannot fully concentrate on their work or other daily tasks. A child-friendly shelter—where their child can play with others, are safe and not abused or bullied—is an arrangement which puts mothers at ease.

A daycare at the office means mothers can go and spend time with their children when they have a light workload or have to feed them, an aspect particularly important for new mothers. This allows working mothers to perform more productively. "Since it is mandatory by law, employers must make such arrangements for working mothers, where the children can stay, play, sleep,

breastfeed, and receive pre-primary education. By creating such a corner, employers can easily create a convenient environment for female employees," hopes Wahida.

Although many parents now depend on privately run daycare centres, an overwhelming majority cannot afford these. For Falguni Ahmed, who works at an insurance company with a monthly salary of BDT 10,000, it is practically impossible for her to spend BDT 6,000 to 8,000 for childcare. "If I spend such a large amount for daycare, I cannot afford the rest of my monthly expenses. I leave my baby with my neighbours, which is obviously inconvenient for them sometimes and also makes me feel down," she says.

"It happens often that my neighbours' child has an exam or something like that, and I need to take her to work with me. My co-workers and office colleagues don't take it very well," adds Falguni.

Though there are 63 low-cost government daycare centres run by the Department of Women's Affairs (DWA) countrywide, demand is much higher. According to Urida Sayeed, deputy director of DWA, only 35 of the 63 daycares are located in the capital—the rest are in divisional cities and towns. Currently, only 2,800 children have been receiving these services, according to Sayeed.

Government daycare centres especially provide services for children from lower-income and middle-income families. Mothers from the former group need to pay a monthly fee of BDT 30 for their children to avail these services, while the fee is BDT 500 per month (earlier it was BDT 250) for the latter group. Children between the ages of six months to six years can stay at these centres between 8.30 in the morning till 5.30 in the afternoon.

But the saddest part is the quality of childcare these centres provide. Although by the DWA standard one nanny is required for 20 children, currently the centres lack this manpower. In most cases, only seven to 11 people maintain an entire centre. "It is tough but since all children are not of the same age, the workers somehow manage to maintain the entire centre with limited resources," says Sayeed. "However, we are working on hiring human resources from outsourcing," she adds.

"Demand for the daycare services is always increasing but execution of these services is not in keeping with the great demand. In fact, the practice of childcare at workplaces is even unfamiliar in government ministries, except a very few number of offices. We are working on to expand the service, as non-government organisations are coming forward, which is good for us," says Sayeed.



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