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The Impact of Free Childcare Services on Women's Economic Opportunities

A Case Study in Guanacaste, Costa Rica

by

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Abstract

While Costa Rica is a country with many impressive social and economic achievements, women in the country are still struggling to participate in and contribute to the economy. The disproportionate share of childcare responsibilities that women in the country often bear, are hindering them from achieving work opportunities and attaining higher educational levels. This qualitative case study has analysed the impact of the free childcare services provided by the National Network for Childcare and Development (*Red Nacional de Cuido y Desarrollo Infantil*, REDCUDI) on women's work and educational opportunities in Costa Rica. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted in field in the province Guanacaste, at the non-profit organisation CEPIA which is part of the REDCUDI, to gain an in-depth understanding of mother beneficiaries' experiences of the free childcare services. Interviews were also conducted with care workers at CEPIA and a social worker at the Technical Secretariat of the REDCUDI, to gain a more general perspective of the relationship between free childcare and women's economic opportunities in Costa Rica.

The results from the case study show that the free childcare services have had a positive impact on the likelihood of working among the mother beneficiaries. Accessing non-parental formal childcare has replaced mothers' previous use of informal childcare, offering their children a more reliable and safer environment to be cared in. Consequently, mothers who previously had to stay at home to care for their children have more time available to work and to earn an income. For, mothers who previously had to work more than eight hours per day to afford childcare, the access to free childcare has meant that they have more time to spend with their children. While the free childcare has improved mothers' work opportunities, the findings show that no mother had pursued education after accessing the services. This implies that achieving the educational objective of the REDCUDI is more challenging than enabling mothers to work. Ensuring that women can achieve higher educational levels and develop their human capital is, however, equally important to improve their future employment and income prospects. This implies that the free childcare services should be accompanied by services or policies which make education more attractive and affordable for poor and economically vulnerable mothers in Costa Rica.

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Research Problem	1
1.2	Aim and Research Question.....	2
2	Background	3
2.1	Costa Rica	3
2.1.1	Women’s Economic Opportunities.....	4
2.1.2	Use of Childcare Services	4
2.1.3	The National Network for Childcare and Development	5
3	Literature Review	6
3.1	The Double Burden of Women.....	6
3.2	Non-Parental Childcare Services	7
3.3	Impact of Childcare on Women’s Economic Opportunities.....	8
4	Theoretical Framework	9
4.1	The Effects of Free Childcare on Maternal Labour Supply and Education.....	9
5	Methodology and Data	11
5.1	Research Approach	11
5.2	Case Study Selection.....	11
5.2.1	Guanacaste	12
5.2.2	CEPIA	12
5.3	Data Collection	13
5.4	Sampling	14
5.5	Data Analysis	15
5.6	Ethical Considerations, Limitations & Validity.....	15
6	Results & Discussion	17
6.1	Profile of Mother Beneficiaries	17
6.2	The Demand for Free Non-Parental Childcare	17
6.2.1	Expensive or Abusive Nannies	17
6.2.2	Childcare Support from Neighbours or Relatives.....	18
6.3	The Impact of Free Non-Parental Childcare.....	19
6.3.1	Work Opportunity	19
6.3.2	Income.....	20
6.3.3	Educational Opportunity	21
7	Conclusion	23

8	References.....	24
9	Appendices.....	30

1 Introduction

Situated in Central America, Costa Rica is a country well known for its social and economic progress, compared to many other countries in Latin America (OECD, 2017a). Still, challenges remain regarding women's economic opportunities in the country. Female labour force participation (FLFP) in Costa Rica is below the average in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), only exceeding 5 out of 25 countries in the region in 2015 (Mateo Díaz & Rodríguez-Chamussy, 2016). Furthermore, in 2021 the female employment rate in the country was more than 23 percentage points below that of men (ILOSTAT, 2021). Also, female-headed households are more likely to be poor compared to male-headed households in Costa Rica (OECD, 2017a). According to the World Bank (2012), enhancing women's participation in the labour market is essential to ensure continued economic growth and welfare improvements in Costa Rica. The skills and competencies women currently not active in the labour market may have, can contribute to increases in labour productivity in the country, once these women are included (World Bank, 2012).

In 2015, half of the unemployed women in Costa Rica viewed family caring responsibilities as the main hindrance to looking for or taking up a job (OECD, 2017a). The unequal share of childcare and other domestic work often laid upon women implies that women are more likely to experience interruptions at work, choose low-wage jobs and work within the informal sector. In turn, many women miss out on benefits associated with formal employment, such as labour rights and pensions (World Bank, 2012).

To alleviate the burden many women in Costa Rica face, of having to give up employment or education because of childcare responsibilities, a law officialising the National Network for Childcare and Development (*Red Nacional de Cuido y Desarrollo Infantil*, REDCUDI) was passed in Costa Rica in 2014. The purpose of the law was to implement a comprehensive policy on childcare (Jiménez-Fontana, 2019), recognising childcare as a right of children, thus making it a public service that should be provided by the government (EUROsociAL, 2015). Through the REDCUDI, families living in poverty or vulnerability are offered free childcare services at centres around the country (OECD, 2017a). The care centres exist to support the educational development of children while their parents are enabled to work or study (Jiménez-Fontana, 2019).

1.1 Research Problem

While much research has been conducted on the relationship between childcare and women's economic participation in developed countries, fewer studies have focused on the context of developing countries (Mateo Díaz & Rodríguez-Chamussy, 2016; Kabear, 2012). The

research that has been focused on LAC, mainly studies the impact on children's education, rather than the effect on women's economic participation (Mateo Díaz & Rodríguez-Chamussy, 2016). Furthermore, few studies address whether free or subsidised childcare affects mothers' human capital outcomes through increases in educational attainment (Schochet & Johnson, 2019). According to Mata (2018), there is also little evaluation on the REDCUDI in Costa Rica. Although statistics exist on the number of childcare centres and children registered, there is insufficient knowledge and evidence regarding how mothers of children in the REDCUDI have been affected economically.

This thesis aims to address this gap in knowledge, by studying how free childcare affects women's economic opportunities and participation in the context of the developing country Costa Rica. Specifically, the impact of the REDCUDI's free childcare services on poor mothers' work and educational opportunities will be evaluated. Exploring the impact of the REDCUDI network on mothers is important, since this will provide an insight into whether Costa Rica's childcare policies are contributing to and supporting women's economic opportunities and participation.

Furthermore, analysing the effects of the REDCUDI is relevant since this may indicate whether the free childcare services work to reduce inequalities in Costa Rica. The provision of free childcare can minimize differences in the access to childcare between higher income households who can afford private childcare, and poorer households who cannot pay for childcare (EUROSociAL, 2015; OECD, 2017a). If the free childcare services enable poor mothers to work and earn more income, alternatively to study and increase their potential income, the REDCUDI can help close the earning gaps between poorer and richer households. Finally, since the main beneficiaries of the REDCUDI are poor families, it is vital to understand the economic effects of the free childcare services, and whether they work as a means for poverty reduction.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

The overall aim of this study is to understand how the provision of free childcare affects poor women's employment and educational opportunities in Costa Rica. To contribute with this knowledge, it is important to understand the local context and the specific characteristics of both the childcare services and its mother beneficiaries. Thus, a case study design has been utilized, focusing on the non-profit organisation CEPIA which offers free childcare services as part of REDCUDI in the province Guanacaste. The case of Guanacaste is important to study since it is the second poorest province in Costa Rica. To fulfil the aim of the thesis, the following research question is asked:

- How does the provision of free childcare services affect women's work and educational opportunities in Guanacaste, Costa Rica?

2 Background

2.1 Costa Rica

Costa Rica is located in Central America, bordering Nicaragua to the north and Panama to the southeast. The country is divided into seven administrative provinces: San José (capital), Alajuela, Cartago, Heredia, Guanacaste, Puntarenas, and Limón (Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy, 2017).

Since 1948, Costa Rica has enjoyed an uninterrupted period of democratic rule, making it one of the most politically stable countries in Latin America (OECD, 2017a). Policy foundations laid out in Costa Rica's social contract, dating back to the 1940s, have enabled many of the country's impressive socio-economic achievements. Among those are a high life expectancy, near universal access to health care and a comprehensive pensions system (OECD, 2017a). Substantial improvements in gender equality have also been witnessed in Costa Rica over the past two decades. This applies not least to schooling, where an impressive closing of the education gap between boys and girls has occurred. Today, Costa Rica's education gender gap is similar to those in Canada and the Netherlands (Mateo Díaz & Rodríguez-Chamussy, 2016).

Despite Costa Rica's previous achievements, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated some of the country's social and economic challenges. In 2020, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) saw the largest drop in four decades, and the poverty level reached 26.2% of all households, reaching the highest level since 1992 (World Bank, 2020; Zúñiga, 2021). The unemployment rates almost doubled in the same year, rising higher than 20% (World Bank, 2020).

During 2021, spending and GDP recovered in Costa Rica, which has led to job creation and improved family income. Despite measures taken by the government to mitigate the social and economic damage of the pandemic, poverty and unemployment rates remain above pre-pandemic levels (World Bank, 2022). 23% of households in Costa Rica lived in poverty in 2021, which is the second-highest recorded value since 1992 (Zúñiga, 2021). Around 6.3% of the country's households lived in extreme poverty in Costa Rica in 2021, which is also above its pre-pandemic level (Zúñiga, 2021).

In the aftermath of the pandemic, the Costa Rican government has created a new economic programme for recovery and stabilization, in which the focus is on addressing fiscal imbalances, boosting productivity, and reducing income inequality. Providing more public childcare and increasing FLFP are among the objectives of the new economic programme, since this can contribute to economic growth, while reducing informality and inequality in Costa Rica (IMF, 2021).

2.1.1 Women's Economic Opportunities

Already before the pandemic, efforts have been undertaken to improve women's economic participation in Costa Rica. Yet, a large part of the unused labour force in the country consists of women, especially mothers with children between 0 and 6 years old (Mateo Díaz & Rodríguez-Chamussy, 2013). Thus, the improvement in girls' education mentioned in section 2.1, has not corresponded to the same positive development in FLFP in Costa Rica, which is substantially lower than that of men. In fact, Costa Rica is one of the countries in LAC with the largest gap between investments in education and labour opportunities for women (Mateo Díaz & Rodríguez-Chamussy, 2016).

Poor female household heads and immigrants are overrepresented among the unemployed women in Costa Rica. The unemployment rate of single female household heads who are poor, is more than double the average unemployment rate for women in the country. Since the educational attainment and skill levels among poorer women are often low, their labour market opportunities are in turn limited, increasing the likelihood of unemployment. Female immigrants in Costa Rica, especially from Nicaragua and other countries in Central America, also have an unemployment rate which is approximately double the average unemployment rate for women in the country (Oviedo, Sanchez, Lindert & Lopez, 2015)

While ensuring that more women can participate in the labour market is an important objective in itself, it is vital for Costa Rica's economy, especially in times of recovery from the pandemic. A higher economic participation of women can contribute to gains in GDP, as well as reduce income inequality and poverty in the country (Mateo Díaz & Rodríguez-Chamussy, 2016). Furthermore, increasing FLFP can help reduce the dependency on social assistance programmes and thus improve public finances (Mateo Díaz & Rodríguez-Chamussy, 2013). Against this background, it is vital for Costa Rica to promote the economic participation of women, since this can reduce inequalities and improve the country's fiscal sustainability.

2.1.2 Use of Childcare Services

Like mentioned in the introduction, childcare responsibilities are one of the main barriers Costa Rican women face to becoming more active in economy. Evidence shows that women in Costa Rica spend more than twice the time on unpaid domestic, care and personal services within the household, compared to men (SDG Technical Secretariat in Costa Rica, 2020). Childcare programmes are therefore seen as an effective tool to enhance women's economic opportunities in the country (Mateo Díaz & Rodríguez-Chamussy, 2016).

At the same time, the childcare attendance among children below three years of age in Costa Rica is only 15%, which can be compared to the OECD average of 35% (OECD, 2016). Furthermore, childcare attendance is the lowest among the bottom two income quintiles, which can be explained by the use of private childcare services among higher income households (OECD, 2016). This implies that public childcare is not widely used among low-income households, families that may need the services the most. The low childcare coverage among poorer families often means that parents, in particular mothers, must choose between

caring for their children at home, or being employed, alternatively pursuing their education (EUROsociAL, 2015; OECD, 2017a). Thus, expanding the availability and use of free childcare services is essential to enhance poor and economically vulnerable women's participation in the Costa Rican labour market (World Bank, 2012), as well as achieving a wide range of educational, social and economic goals (OECD, 2017a).

2.1.3 The National Network for Childcare and Development

The REDCUDI network was initiated in Costa Rica in 2010, as an effort to improve coherence and coordination between different public and private institutions that offer childcare services in the country (Mata 2018; EUROsociAL, 2015). In 2014, the childcare network was institutionalized by law (eds. Cecchini, Filgueira, Martínez & Rossel, 2015). Care centres that are part of the REDCUDI are either partially or fully financed by the Costa Rican government, including both public and private providers of childcare, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), religious groups and private businesses (Mata 2018; OECD, 2017b). In 2020, around 56 945 children were registered in the REDCUDI, and 1344 childcare centres were subsidised by the network in Costa Rica (UNICEF, 2020).

The aim of the REDCUDI is to guarantee children's right to childcare while their parents are enabled to work or study, through the provision of publicly accessible and universal childcare with a solidary funding system (EUROsociAL, 2015). Among the objectives of the REDCUDI is also to promote gender equality, by supporting mothers in particular, to be able to combine education or employment with childcare responsibilities (Esquivel & Kaufmann, 2017; eds. Cecchini et al. 2015).

The socioeconomic situation of the families which access REDCUDI's free childcare services include poor, socially vulnerable and at-risk families, which may include households in which the mother cannot work unless her child is taken care of at a centre (eds. Cecchini et al. 2015; Batthyány Dighiero, 2015).

The REDCUDI network has childcare centres in all 81 cantons of Costa Rica, which are the second greatest administrative division in the country after provinces. However, the greatest concentration of childcare centres is in urban cantons within the San José province (Mata, 2018).

3 Literature Review

3.1 The Double Burden of Women

Several studies have investigated the impact of domestic responsibilities, including childcare, on women's economic opportunities. According to the Overseas Development Institute, women spend more time than men on unpaid care in both developing and developed countries (ODI, 2016). Having young children has been found to hinder women from obtaining formal employment, due to the time-consuming childcare required (Quisimbung, Hallman & Ruel, 2007). This can be explained at least in part by traditional gender norms prevailing in many societies, that reinforce expectations on women to be primary responsible for childcare and other household duties (Wickramasinghe & Jayatilake, 2006). Although the formal employment of women has increased in many countries in recent years (Wickramasinghe & Jayatilake, 2006), evidence shows that the reduction in women's time spent on domestic work, is not proportionate to the additional hours spent on formal work (ODI, 2016). This implies that the total responsibilities of working women are growing, often referred to as the "the double burden of women" (Wickramasinghe & Jayatilake, 2006, p.43).

The burden of both paid and unpaid work affects a woman's labour market decisions in multiple ways, including whether to join the labour force, to seek permanent employment, to take part in on-the-job training, and to work part-time or full time. Ultimately, the double burden affects a woman's ability to remain in the labour force, when household chores and care responsibilities become more demanding than her paid work (Madurawala, 2009). In some cases, mothers may prefer informal employment to formal employment, because of more flexible working hours which can easier be combined with care responsibilities (ODI, 2016; Todd, 2013). Working within the informal sector, however, often means earning less and missing out on health benefits that exist within formal employment (Todd, 2013).

Women's conflicting roles of being both caretakers and income earners is thus holding many mothers back from advancing economically (ODI, 2016). The trade-off women experience between productive and reproductive responsibilities, is believed to explain much of the differences between female and male labour market outcomes (Quisimbung, Hallman & Ruel, 2007). When mothers' labour market opportunities are restricted due to family obligations, this may also exacerbate the gender pay gap (Pereznieto & Campos, 2010).

3.2 Non-Parental Childcare Services

If families can access non-parental childcare, more time will be available for the parents to make use of economic opportunities (Pereznieto & Campos, 2010). Since mothers often bear the role as primary caretakers, the provision of non-parental childcare can help increase women's economic opportunities and participation in particular (World Bank, 2012).

First, non-parental childcare services can help solve the trade-off between mothers' care and employment responsibilities (ed. Bosch, 2021). Specifically, women may be more encouraged to seek formal rather than informal employment, since there will be less time demands for childcare on mothers who access non-parental childcare. In turn, this improves mothers' capacity to work the hours required within formal work (Todd, 2013). Second, the access to non-parental childcare can free up time for education and training, especially for low-income women who often have limited schooling opportunities due to the demands of care responsibilities (Schochet & Johnson, 2019).

Enabling mothers to work or study by improving the access to non-parental childcare, is likely to give rise to positive spillover effects. With a higher income from better work opportunities or an increase in potential net earnings through a higher educational attainment, women are more likely than men to invest the additional income towards their children's health and education, as well as to housing (World Bank, 2012).

Despite the importance of non-parental childcare services for women's economic opportunities and in turn households' economic well-being, access to safe and regulated childcare is limited and expensive in many parts of the developing world. Evidence from 67 developing countries shows that on average, only one-third of children aged three to five are enrolled in childcare programmes (ODI, 2016). According to Mateo Díaz and Rodriguez-Chamussy (2016), providing subsidized non-parental childcare in developing countries is therefore essential to ensure a successful expansion of childcare programmes, and in turn improve women's labour force participation and access to education. Furthermore, ensuring that poorer mothers can make use of their economic opportunities while their children receive early education, can help reduce gaps between poorer and richer households in school results, employment, and income (Mateo Díaz & Rodriguez-Chamussy, 2016).

According to Blau and Currie (2006), there is also an economic rationale for governments to provide subsidized or free childcare, since this may enable poor parents to work and eventually become economically self-sufficient. Providing free childcare to low-income families while also encouraging the parents to work, may be less costly for society, compared to if these low-income families were dependent on welfare. The authors also explain that parents may adopt a work ethic and generate human capital because of the employment-related subsidies, which increases their future self-sufficiency. Thus, although providing childcare may be costly for a government today, in the long run, governments may save money as parents' future income increases and they become less reliant on subsidies throughout their lifetime.

3.3 Impact of Childcare on Women's Economic Opportunities

Most empirical evidence from both developed and developing countries show that affordable and widely available childcare has a positive impact on female labour market outcomes. Blau and Currie (2006) find that lower costs of childcare are related to a higher FLFP in the United States. In both Brazil and Ecuador, evaluation research shows that free childcare has led to increases in mothers' employment and household incomes (Paes de Barros, Olinto, Lunde & Carvalho, 2011; Rosero & Oosterbeek, 2011). Busso and Fonseca (2015) suggest that the expansion of subsidized childcare is one of the main drivers behind FLFP increases in Latin America for the past decades. The authors also argue that as childcare has become more accessible, a convergence between disadvantaged and advantaged groups has occurred within countries in the region.

According to Akgunduz and Plantenga (2011), however, whether lower childcare costs lead to increases in FLFP, depends on a country's initial conditions. In countries where the FLFP is already at a high level, cheaper childcare may not lead to substantial positive effects on female employment. On the other hand, in countries with an initially low FLFP, traditional values may hinder any productive outcomes of cheaper childcare on mothers' employment.

In their qualitative study, Pereznieta and Campos (2010) analysed the effects of a subsidised childcare services programme in Mexico, the *Estancias Infantiles para Apoyar a Madres Trabajadoras*. The Mexican programme is similar to the REDCUDI, since it aims to promote poor mothers' work opportunities and access to higher education. The authors find that the subsidised childcare enabled poor mother beneficiaries to find paid employment and increase their income. In some cases, the formal childcare helped women manage their time better and in turn find more stable employment opportunities. Furthermore, mothers' self-esteem, agency and negotiating power within the household were also found to have been improved, resulting in a sense of empowerment for some women.

According to Pereznieta and Campos (2010), the subsidised childcare in Mexico was especially beneficial for single mothers, including very young mothers that became pregnant as teenagers, and those who have been abandoned by their partner. The childcare programme enabled these mothers to work and earn an income to support their family by themselves. Thus, the authors argue that the programme also worked to reduce inequalities in income and access to employment, between poor mothers who cannot afford private childcare, and high-income women who can afford it, which offers them better opportunities for employment.

Regarding education, however, there was less evidence that mothers had started studying after accessing the subsidised childcare. Pereznieta and Campos conclude that this implies that mothers prioritise work over studies in order to support their families, which points to the challenge of human capital accumulation for women, especially poor young mothers.

4 Theoretical Framework

4.1 The Effects of Free Childcare on Maternal Labour Supply and Education

The provision of free childcare can be seen as a price decline of formal non-parental childcare relative to other childcare arrangements (Busse & Gathmann, 2018). Free childcare services can affect maternal labour supply at both the extensive margin, meaning the likelihood of working, and the intensive margin, referring to the number of hours worked (Clark, Laszlo, Kabiru & Muthuri, 2017). To illustrate the different possible effects on a mother's labour supply after starting to use free childcare, it is worth distinguishing between mothers who previously paid for childcare and those who did not (Busse & Gathmann, 2018).

In the first case, mothers who previously did pay for someone to look after their children, starts using the free childcare services instead. According to economic theory, the effects of free childcare on the intensive margin of labour are in this case ambiguous. This is because both the income effect and the substitution effect may influence how many hours mothers choose to work (Blau & Currie, 2006; Todd, 2013). On the one hand, starting to use the free services means that less hours of work are needed to maintain the same level of consumption and amount of childcare as before (Busse & Gathmann, 2018; Harmon, Finn, Chevalier & Viitanen, 2006). Under the assumption that leisure is a normal good, the so-called income effect may consequently reduce the number of hours a mother chooses to work, enabling her to consume more leisure or spend more time with her child (Busse & Gathmann, 2018; Todd, 2013). On the other hand, the free childcare increases the monetary payoff of each hour worked. In other words, the opportunity cost of working is lower. Thus, the substitution effect may lead to an increase in maternal labour supply at the intensive margin (Busse & Gathmann, 2018; Harmon et al. 2006; Zangger, Widmer & Gilgen, 2021). In which way a mother's working hours is affected by the use of free childcare, depends on the relative strengths of the income and substitution effects (Zangger, Widmer & Gilgen, 2021).

In the second case, mothers who previously did not pay for childcare start accessing the free childcare services. This includes mothers who stayed at home to look after their children and who did not work. For these mothers, the opportunity cost of working will also be lower when starting to access the free childcare. Thus, the access to free childcare may in this case lead to an increase in maternal labour supply at both the extensive and intensive margin (Busse & Gathmann, 2018; Congressional Budget Office, 2021).

However, if a mother previously worked while using unpaid informal care from relatives, friends, or neighbours, starting to use the free childcare may not cause any changes in her working hours. The use of unpaid informal care is simply replaced by the free formal

childcare. This is referred to as the crowding-out effect, in which the free formal childcare services are crowding out informal childcare arrangements (Zangger, Widmer & Gilgen, 2021).

Besides maternal labour supply, free childcare may also have an effect on maternal education. The additional time and money that becomes available to mothers when using free childcare services, can be used to pursue education (Schochet & Johnson, 2019). While an increase in maternal labour supply as a result of access to free childcare may lead to immediate payoffs in earnings, an increase in educational attainment can lead to higher future returns to employment (Schochet & Johnson, 2019; Kabeer, 2009). Through education, women can accumulate human capital which increases the likelihood of working within the formal sector and achieving career advancement (Kabeer, 2012). Furthermore, higher levels of education enable women to develop the skills necessary to demand higher wages (Sida, 2015). Education is therefore essential for women, especially low income-mothers, to be able to pursue labour market opportunities and improve their economic situation (Schochet & Johnson, 2019; Kabeer 2012).

5 Methodology and Data

5.1 Research Approach

Most studies assessing the impact of free childcare on women's economic situation utilize a quantitative approach, by looking at data on access to childcare and women's work or education choices. Furthermore, many studies conduct surveys to evaluate the economic impact of subsidised or free childcare on mothers (Mateo Díaz & Rodriguez-Chamussy, 2016). Quantitative methods are useful for generalisation and for measuring the extent to which childcare is used as well as the size of its economic effect (eds. Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

The aim of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the complexity and diversity of the relationship between free childcare and women's economic opportunities, rather than quantifying and analysing their statistical relationship. A qualitative research approach has thus been chosen, which is a suitable method for exploring people's experiences of a social or human phenomena. In particular, a qualitative method allows for the exploration of mothers' diverse perceptions, feelings, and opinions regarding free childcare, which could not be achieved through quantitative methods.

Since social values often influence women's childcare responsibilities and labour market decisions, it is important to understand the particular characteristics and cultural setting of the women under study. To achieve this, a case study design of inquiry has been chosen for this study, since this allows the researcher to understand the particular nature and complexity of a specific case (Bryman, 2012). Case studies are often used by researchers when conducting an in-depth evaluation of a programme, activity, or process (Yin, 2009), which makes it an appropriate method to intensively examine the setting of CEPIA's childcare programme in Guanacaste and its effects on mothers' economic opportunities.

5.2 Case Study Selection

The case of the non-profit organisation CEPIA has been chosen for this study to understand the effects of free childcare on poor mothers in the province Guanacaste in Costa Rica. CEPIA's childcare programme is part of the REDCUDI and is financed partially by the government but also by private donors. Thus, studying mothers' experiences of CEPIA's free childcare services provides insight into what impact the REDCUDI has had on women's work and educational opportunities in Guanacaste. This study can therefore be considered as an

“exemplifying case”, since the experiences of mother beneficiaries at CEPIA may exemplify how free childcare through the REDCUDI affects women in Guanacaste (Bryman, 2012).

5.2.1 Guanacaste

Guanacaste is located in the northwest of Costa Rica along the Pacific Coast, and is bordered by Nicaragua to the north (Jordan, 2022). For the past three decades, the coastal zone of Guanacaste with its long beaches and rich natural diversity, has transformed into an economy of international tourism (NCA, 2014). Still, Guanacaste is the second poorest province in Costa Rica. Due to its high economic dependency on tourism, it was also the province that experienced the largest increases in poverty during the height of COVID-19. From 2019 to 2020, the poverty incidence in the province increased from 20.3% to 31.7% while the incidence of extreme poverty increased from 5.4% to 9.0% (Zúñiga, 2021).

Already before the pandemic, Guanacaste was facing other social and economic challenges. In 2014, Guanacaste was the province with the highest average birth rate for girls aged below 18 in Costa Rica, after the provinces Limón and Puntarenas. That year, the rate of teenage pregnancies in Guanacaste was 22, meaning that 22 out of 1000 girls aged between 10 and 17 years old had given birth (Acuña Ávalos, 2015). Adolescent mothers often experience interruptions in their studies and are more likely to drop out of school compared to girls who have not become pregnant. In turn, low levels of education have a negative impact on teenage mothers’ future employment and income potential. Thus, adolescent pregnancies may be a source of poverty, but can also be the product of poverty. In Costa Rica, poor girls from rural and remote areas with low levels of education, are three times more likely to become pregnant compared to girls from urban areas with higher levels of education (Agudelo, 2019).

With this background in mind, it is important to study how CEPIA’s free childcare services are affecting mothers in Guanacaste, a province with high levels of poverty and teenage pregnancies.

5.2.2 CEPIA

The non-profit organisation CEPIA was founded in 2005, with the aim of promoting culture, education, and labour opportunities, as well as improving the mental and physical health, participation, and social cohesion of children and their families in poor communities in Guanacaste. The organisation’s comprehensive daytime care centre for children is the focus of this study. The centre provides free care and education to children between 2 and 17 years of age from families within the lowest income quintile. In 2020, 108 minors in vulnerable situations received care through CEPIA (CEPIA, 2020). The four age groups of minors who can attend the CEPIA’s childcare centre are listed in Table 1. This study has focused on mother beneficiaries who have children attending CEPIA within the first three age groups. Before a child is registered at the care centre, a socioeconomic study is conducted of the family (CEPIA, 2020).

Table 1: Age Groups at CEPIA's Childcare Programme

Age Group	Schedule (Monday to Friday)
2 to 4 years	7 AM to 4 PM
4 to 6 years	7 AM to 4 PM
7 to 12 years*	7 AM to 12 PM or 12.30 PM to 4 PM
13 to 17 years	7 AM to 3 PM

*Children aged 7 to 12 years can attend CEPIA's care centre outside their 4-hour day in public school, which is either scheduled in the morning from 7 AM to 1 PM or in the afternoon from 1 PM to 5 PM.

Source: CEPIA (2020)

5.3 Data Collection

Since the experiences of free childcare and its economic effects can be very personal for mother beneficiaries, one-on-one interviews were conducted for the data collection of this study, to gain an in-depth understanding of each woman's thoughts and opinions. In-depth interviews are one of the most common data collection methods within qualitative studies, enabling the researcher to explore the depth of interview participants' answers, as well as combine structure with flexibility (eds. Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Usually, qualitative research is conducted in the natural setting, where participants experience the phenomena under study. This allows for up-close information and face-to-face interaction with the participants (Creswell, 2014). Primary data was therefore collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with mother beneficiaries and care workers at CEPIA in Guanacaste, during a two-month field study in Costa Rica. Virtual interviews were also held with a key informant at the Technical Secretariat of the REDCUDI. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner since this leaves room for topics that could not have been foreseen to be expressed and later analysed. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews were chosen, since valuable information can be observed through body language, gestures, change of tones and pauses of the respondents, which would not be communicated through written answers.

Three different interview protocols were developed for the three different categories of respondents, which contained questions to guide the researcher during the interviews. The interview protocols can be found in section 9. Appendices. The researcher's key informant at CEPIA was consulted to make the interview protocol for the mother beneficiaries relevant to the local context.

Mother beneficiaries were interviewed about how their time availability and opportunities to work or educate themselves have been affected, after registering their children at the childcare

programme at CEPIA. These interviews provided insight into the relative importance of the free childcare for the different mothers' economic opportunities.

Caretakers at CEPIA were interviewed, since they are familiar with the mothers of the children enrolled at their childcare programme and can offer their perspective on how the beneficiaries have been affected. They were also asked to reflect upon challenges with the implementation of the childcare programme, and how it can be improved to support mothers' economic situation.

Finally, a social worker at the Technical Secretariat of the REDCUDI was interviewed, in order to provide a broader understanding of the REDCUDI and its effects on women's economic situation in Costa Rica. The purpose of this key informant interview was also to understand what challenges exist with the implementation of the free childcare programme in the country.

Since some of the mother beneficiaries and care workers interviewed did not speak English, an interpreter accompanied the researcher at the interviews at CEPIA. The interpreter helped translating the researcher's questions into Spanish, and the interviewees' answers into English for the researcher. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded. Handwritten notes were also taken during the interviews as a safety measure in case the recording equipment failed.

Additional data was also gathered through reports and government documents about the REDCUDI, to contextualize the research and gain a more general perspective of the output of the childcare network.

5.4 Sampling

In the sampling process of mother beneficiaries for the interviews, no specific characteristics of the mothers were desired nor excluded, since the aim of the study was to gain an insight into a variety of mothers' experiences with CEPIA's free childcare services. Still, the resulting research sample of mother beneficiaries does reflect the user base of CEPIA's childcare programme. The majority of mothers interviewed were immigrants and single parents, which the majority of users of the free childcare services at CEPIA also are (CEPIA, n.d.; CEPIA, 2019).

So-called "key informant recruitment" was used to find mother beneficiaries (Bryman, 2012), as a director and an educator at CEPIA arranged the interviews with the mothers before the field study. The fact that two staff of CEPIA arranged the interviews with the mothers does imply a risk of bias. However, this solution was the most appropriate to get into contact with the mother beneficiaries of CEPIA's childcare, given the researcher's time frame and resources.

The two care workers at CEPIA were chosen using purposive sampling, meaning that they were strategically chosen due to their relevance for the research (Bryman, 2012). The care

workers had to be familiar with mother beneficiaries of CEPIA's free childcare programme, in order to offer their perspective on how mothers have been affected by their services. One of the workers was the initiator and former administrator of the childcare programme at CEPIA. The other worker was a former teacher for the primary grades and now a teacher for the infants at CEPIA.

5.5 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts served as the primary data for analysis in this study. Because the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, this has allowed for concepts and themes to emerge during the collection and interpretation of the data. By organising and reflecting upon the identified concepts, this has guided the researcher towards answering the research question. This is known as an inductive approach, which has been used as the primary strategy for data analysis in this study (Bryman, 2012).

Inductive and deductive approaches of data analysis are, however, not mutually exclusive (Bryman, 2012). Once themes and concepts have been established, the researcher often deductively analyses whether the data sufficiently supports the themes or if more information is necessary (Creswell, 2014). In this study too, there has been a deductive element to the data analysis strategy.

5.6 Ethical Considerations, Limitations & Validity

Conducting a field study as a foreigner about a topic that can be very personal, may feel like an intrusion into the lives of the mother beneficiaries being interviewed. Interviewees may also be concerned about how information about them will be used. Thus, before each interview, participants' informed consent to participate in the interviews were obtained. This means that the respondents were informed about the objective of the study and how the data from the interviews would be used (eds. Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Participants were then asked to fill in a consent form if they agreed to participate in the interview, in which the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviews were highlighted. In the presentation of this study's findings, the names of the mother beneficiaries have been changed, using a list of common names for the country of origin of each participant.

By using an interpreter, linguistic barriers may have led to some words or phrases being lost in translation from the mothers' answers. However, the researcher has intermediate proficiency in Spanish, and could therefore always follow along and understand the overall context of the respondents' answers, even if they were in Spanish. Also, since the interviews were audiotaped, the researcher could go back to the recordings if something was unclear or if some answers needed more accurate translation.

The use of an interpreter also makes it relevant to discuss whether mothers may have felt uncomfortable having their answers translated and not speaking directly to the researcher. This risk may have been mitigated by the fact that the interpreter used, is a previous staff of CEPIA. Thus, the interpreter and the mothers were often familiar with each other. Since the interpreter was also a woman, this may have contributed to a more comfortable setting for the mothers, compared to if an unknown male interpreter had been used.

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to validate the research findings, meaning that the researcher checks the accuracy and credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2014). In this study, triangulation was utilized to validate the findings, meaning that the data from the interviews was cross-checked with the additional data gathered through reports about CEPIA's childcare programme and government documents about the REDCUDI (Bryman, 2012).

Since this study has been conducted on a specific case with a smaller sample, the external validity or generalisability of the study's findings is limited. The aim of a case study research design is, however, not to generalise the findings to other cases or populations (Bryman, 2012). Rather, the purpose of case studies is to conduct an in-depth examination of a single case, followed by a theoretical analysis (Bryman, 2012). While the study's finding may not be suitable to generalize to other provinces of Costa Rica, due to different socio-political and geographical contexts, the study may offer implications as to how CEPIA's childcare services have affected women in the Guanacaste province. Since not only native Costa Rican mothers were interviewed, but also immigrants from Jamaica, the Philippines and Nicaragua, this may offer a perspective on how a wide range of mothers have been affected economically by the free childcare services.

6 Results & Discussion

6.1 Profile of Mother Beneficiaries

In total, six mother beneficiaries of the free childcare services at CEPIA were interviewed. The number of children the mothers provided care for ranged from one to four, within the age range from two to seventeen years. Two mothers had one child attending CEPIA's childcare centre, while four mothers had two children attending the centre. All mothers had been using CEPIA's free childcare services for at least one year.

Four mothers were single while two were married. Nearly all mothers had a complete high school education while only one mother had a complete bachelor's degree. All mothers lived with their children, the two married mothers lived with their husbands, and two mothers also lived with a relative. Only one of the mothers was native Costa Rican, while three were immigrants from Nicaragua, one from Jamaica and one from the Philippines.

6.2 The Demand for Free Non-Parental Childcare

In this section, the mother beneficiaries' childcare responsibilities and economic situation before accessing free childcare services at CEPIA will be presented. This will in turn enable an analysis of the impact of the free childcare on the mothers' economic opportunities in the subsequent section of the data analysis. At the same time, this section will also present the reasons why mothers have decided to start using CEPIA's free childcare. Exploring what determines the mothers' demand of the free childcare, provides relevant context to in turn understand the diverse impact of the services on different mothers' economic opportunities.

Five of the six mothers interviewed were single parents at the time they started to use CEPIA's free childcare services. Although they had been separated from their children's father for different amounts of time, the mutual experience was that the fathers were not present to share any childcare or financial responsibilities. Instead, the mothers were solely responsible for looking after the children and supporting them economically. Being poor mothers, the struggle of managing both childcare and earning an income was an experience expressed by all mothers, including the mother who was married when starting to use CEPIA's childcare. In what way the mothers coped with the dual responsibilities before accessing free childcare services through CEPIA, however, differed.

6.2.1 Expensive or Abusive Nannies

Since me and the children's dad divorced, I have had many difficulties with taking care of the kids. The dad didn't help or pay anything after the divorce, so I had to start working more. It has been hard since I must pay for food, rent, etc.

As illustrated by Maria's statement above, after divorcing from her children's father, any childcare or financial support from the father has been absent. To manage both the childcare and financial responsibilities as a single mother, she used to pay for a nanny to look after her children while she was working. However, using a nanny is expensive, as Maria explained: "Many mothers in this area work with cleaning like me, but the salary is very bad. The costs of a nanny or day care services is sometimes more than the salary from cleaning". To afford paying for a nanny, Maria used to work both with house cleaning and as a hotel receptionist. She explained how working ten hours per day affected both her and her children:

In the morning when I left for work, the children slept, in the evening when I came home from work, the children were also sleeping. It was very hard. My daughter even asked me: "Don't you love us? You are never at home". So, my father had to take the children to my job so that they could see me. The kids cried when they had to leave me, and it broke my heart.

Like Maria, Samantha used to have two jobs which enabled her to pay for a nanny to look after her children. She explained her previous work situation as a single mother: "At that time, it was hard for me because I worked for nearly sixteen hours a day. You know, single mom, you do it for your kids' future".

While Maria and Samanta both stopped using a nanny due to the expensive costs, Ruth and her husband, who also used to hire a nanny, had to stop for their children's safety. Ruth described how she and her husband have been unlucky with nannies: "They have been rude to the kids. They have abused them physically. So, my husband said that he prefers that I stay at home and take care of the kids, so I couldn't work". Although Ruth was not a single mother, she was expected to take care of the children when the use of a nanny was inappropriate, hindering her from working.

6.2.2 Childcare Support from Neighbours or Relatives

Besides using a nanny, some mothers had relatives or neighbours who could help with childcare while they were working. Thelma described how her neighbours used to help her look after her children: "I was lucky before when I could use my neighbours to help me look after the children. I tried to give them something in return sometimes, but they wouldn't accept it". Although Thelma was lucky to receive childcare support from her neighbours, childcare responsibilities still affected her job: "Sometimes I worked night because the kids have to go to school, and in Costa Rica you have to be there as a guardian or the parent to pick up the kids, so it was difficult".

Arlen's mother used to help her with childcare but then became sick. Arlen described how she was affected by this: "I didn't have anyone to take care of my children while I worked with cleaning or took courses".

The experiences of Thelma and Arlen illustrate that childcare support from relatives or neighbours may enable mothers to work temporarily, but it may not be suitable in the long-term. Furthermore, in the case of Cecilia, she did not have any relatives or neighbours available to help her with childcare. Instead, she had to stay at home and take care of her children, which meant that she had no time to work.

The difficulties of finding childcare support as a single mom, including from relatives, were confirmed by teacher Ana Laura at CEPIA. She described a common situation for many single mothers before they start using CEPIA's free childcare: "In general, mothers are single mothers, so they don't have anyone else that can take care of the kids, and many mothers are immigrants, so they don't have any family which can support with childcare".

6.3 The Impact of Free Non-Parental Childcare

6.3.1 Work Opportunity

All four mother beneficiaries who were working when they started to use CEPIA's childcare have been able to continue working after accessing the free services. Only one of the two mothers who were unemployed when starting to access the childcare had become employed at the time of the interviews. However, the other mother who was unemployed has not been able to work since she became pregnant shortly after starting to use CEPIA's childcare. Thus, when only considering the five mother beneficiaries who have had the ability to work during their use of CEPIA's services, the findings imply that the free childcare has had a positive impact on the extensive margin of maternal labour supply.

The types of work opportunities the mother beneficiaries have been able to access, however, are mainly low-income jobs within the service sector, including restaurant, beauty, and domestic work. Furthermore, more than half of the working mothers only had a part-time employment, since this was the only option compatible with also looking after their children. Maria explained how she is limited to only working 5 hours per day, despite the access to CEPIA's free childcare: "I work with cleaning between 8 AM to 1 PM because this is the work I can manage while also taking care of the kids". Cecilia, who also only works part-time with cleaning, described how time demands from childcare responsibilities affects her work opportunities:

I work with cleaning houses. Because I have many kids with different schedules at school, I must be at home to manage. Sometimes they're in school in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon. So, this job fits with their different schedules.

The experiences of Maria and Cecilia imply that even with access to free non-parental childcare, being a single mother with more than one child poses a challenge to working more than part-time.

Within the objectives of the REDCUDI it is not explicitly stated what type of work opportunities mother beneficiaries should be able to access as a result of free childcare. The aim of the childcare network is rather that mothers can work while their child is taken care of for free, with less emphasis on the type of work opportunities. One of the care workers at CEPIA explained that: “Although mothers may not always have a stable employment, for example if they only work with cleaning houses three to four hours per day, at least we know that the women have found a job”. The key informant at the Technical Secretariat of the REDCUDI also described how it is not within the scope of the childcare network to promote certain types of jobs:

The goal of REDCUDI is to provide the children with the right to be in a nurtured environment, while the parents or the families may have the option to work or study. But it's not under our competences what kind of job it is, that would be the territory of economic politics or other instances like the Ministry of Labour, that's not something we have set as a goal at the national level, it's not something the law says that we have to do.

Although it is beyond the scope of the REDCUDI to ensure certain types of jobs for the mother beneficiaries, the results from this study imply that focusing on the quality of the jobs which mothers can access is also important, besides ensuring that mothers can work in the first place. Especially in the case of poor or economically vulnerable single mothers who must support their children while also paying for costs like rent themselves, it is important to expand their work opportunities beyond low-income jobs and part-time employment.

Regarding the intensive margin of maternal labour supply, the results show that all mothers who were already working when starting to use CEPIA's childcare are working less hours after accessing the free services. These findings are consistent with the income effect, which predicts that working mothers supply less hours of labour after accessing free childcare, while still enjoying the same level of consumption as before. The degree of the income effect has, however, varied between the mothers.

The two mothers who previously paid for nannies and who worked more than eight hours per day, demonstrated the strongest income effect, thus the largest decline in working hours. A relatively weaker income effect was found among the two mothers who previously relied on unpaid informal childcare from relatives or neighbours. These mothers did not work more than eight hours before, which can explain why the decline in working hours is not as large as in the case of the mothers who had two jobs before. Another possible explanation may be the crowding-out effect, which does not induce any large change in labour supply, because the use of unpaid informal care has simply been replaced with the free formal childcare services.

6.3.2 Income

The findings from this study suggest that the effects of free childcare on mothers' income is mixed. Naturally, the effects depend on whether the mother is working more or less after accessing the free childcare compared to before. However, some mothers are not necessarily

working more, instead they have been able to change to better paid jobs after accessing the free childcare, which has led to an increase in income.

Cecilia, who was able to start working after accessing CEPIA's childcare, described how her income has improved since she obtained employment: "I was able to get a job, so I feel more comfortable about my economic situation. There is more stability. Before I didn't have the time to work".

Samantha, who used to work nearly sixteen hours per day before, is working less after accessing the free childcare services. Nevertheless, her income has improved. Besides working full-time as a waitress, she described how she has had more time for part-time jobs:

I have more time to do something like a part-time job or do "buy and sell". I usually buy and sell a branch of lingerie, and I go to San José to buy clothes and then sell them from home online. I make more money now with my part-time jobs. Although I work as a waitress, I still make more money.

Like Samantha, Arlen's income has improved although she is working less. After accessing CEPIA's childcare, Arlen has had more time to study nail technician courses which in turn has enabled her to start working as a nail technician. She described how her income has improved compared to before she started using the free childcare, when she was working as a cleaning lady: "Now the situation is much better. The economy is working. Now that I work with nails, providing my services in a spa, I cannot complain because I'm doing well with my job, so the situation is much better". Arlen also described how the free childcare has helped her and her husband save money:

As a parent, you have a duty to get a job and do the best for your kid. Depending on the job, the economic situation doesn't always allow one to pay for a nanny, day care or babysitter, so that's where CEPIA comes and helps us. That money which we save with CEPIA, we can use for more groceries, things for the kids, rent, and so on.

Both Maria and Thelma who are working less after accessing CEPIA's childcare, have not experienced any change to their income. Maria explained that she prefers to spend the extra time she has with her children rather than on working to earn more income: "If I must weigh more economic stability against taking care of my children, I prefer to live with a little less but spending more time with my children and making our relationship stronger". Similarly, while Thelma used to work 8 hours per day before, she only works 6 or 7 hours some days after accessing the free childcare, which she prefers since she has more time with her kids. Again, these findings confirm the predictions of the income effect. In this case, however, Maria and Thelma are choosing to spend more time with their children, rather than consuming more leisure. This also illustrates that even after accessing free childcare, a trade-off between spending time with one's children (income effect) and working more to earn a higher income (substitution effect) persists.

6.3.3 Educational Opportunity

Like previously mentioned, Arlen has been able to study nail technician courses after accessing CEPIA's childcare. Similarly, Cecilia has been able to take courses in "telephone customer service" and "work abilities", while Ruth has taken both a course in English and cooking at CEPIA after accessing the free childcare.

While some mothers have been able to study courses, no mother has pursued higher education after accessing free childcare. Maria and Cecilia, who both have incomplete bachelor's degrees, have not taken up their education again, explaining that "I still cannot finish it due to my economic situation. I cannot pay for it" and "It's too expensive. I don't have the money. I don't have the resources".

Since the highest level of education for the majority of the mother beneficiaries interviewed was high school, this may explain why their work opportunities was shown to be rather limited to low-paid employment, as discussed above. The objective of the REDCUDI, to enable mothers to study, is therefore especially relevant in this case, since pursuing higher education may expand mothers' work opportunities after accumulating more skills and human capital. However, since none of the mothers interviewed had pursued higher education after accessing CEPIA's childcare, this implies that either the mothers' educational opportunities have not changed, or they prefer to work rather than continuing to study. The statements of Maria and Cecilia above, illustrate that pursuing higher education is expensive. In the context of mother beneficiaries who are either poor or economically vulnerable, it is therefore not surprising that working is more common than studying. Pursuing higher education may not be affordable and only increases the future returns to employment. Working, however, means receiving an immediate payoff which can be used to support one's children. Thus, while enabling mothers to study is one of the objectives of the REDCUDI, more is needed to encourage and enable poor mother beneficiaries to use their time for studying rather than working. Policies such as subsidies to education may need to accompany the free childcare services to make studying more attractive. Even in the case of the mother beneficiary who had a complete bachelor's degree in Business Administration, she was working at a restaurant and not with something related to her education. This implies that the free childcare may also need to be accompanied with job matching services for mothers, which can help close the gap between investments in education and actual work opportunities for women.

7 Conclusion

The provision of free childcare services is an important enabler of poor or economically vulnerable women's employment and educational opportunities. In this case study of the free childcare services at the non-profit organisation CEPIA in Guanacaste, which is part of the REDCUDI childcare network in Costa Rica, the impact of free childcare on mothers' economic opportunities has been analysed. Data was collected through interviews with six mother beneficiaries of CEPIA's childcare, two childcare workers at CEPIA and one key informant at the Technical Secretariat of the REDCUDI. The results show that mothers have been able to start working or continue working after accessing the free childcare, which has led to a higher income in some cases. The formal non-parental childcare through CEPIA has replaced mothers' previous use of informal childcare, which in some cases have been expensive or precarious. The access to the free childcare has in turn led to mothers having more time available for work or to spend with their children.

Although the free childcare has had a positive impact on the likelihood of working, no mother had continued to pursue education after accessing CEPIA's services. The findings from the analysis show that studying is expensive for the mothers, making the objective of the REDCUDI to promote women's educational opportunities more challenging to achieve than the promotion of mothers' work opportunities. Other policies or services may therefore need to accompany the provision of free childcare through the REDCUDI, to encourage women to continue studying and accumulate more human capital, which is important for their future employment and income prospects.

Finally, there are some aspects of women's economic opportunities that are beyond the scope of the REDCUDI's objectives, but that could be improved and important to evaluate within future research. Namely, helping mothers expand their work opportunities beyond low-income jobs or part-time employment. Nevertheless, the results from this case study finds that free childcare enables poor or economically vulnerable single mothers in particular, to access work opportunities and earn an income while their children are cared for in a safe environment.

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9 Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol – Mother Beneficiaries

Introduction

1. Could you tell me a little about yourself and your family? How many people live in your household?
2. How many children do you have? How old are they?
3. Are you married?
4. How long have you lived in Guanacaste, Costa Rica?
5. What is your highest level of education?
6. What is your current occupation?

Life Before CEPIA’s Free Childcare

7. How long have you been using CEPIA’s childcare services?
8. Why did you decide to start using CEPIA’s childcare services?
9. Before accessing childcare, who took care of your children?
10. Before accessing childcare, did you work or study? If not, what hindered you from working or studying?

Life After CEPIA’s Free Childcare

11. How has your life changed after accessing childcare?
12. After accessing childcare, has more time become available to you?
13. After accessing childcare, has your work or study situation changed? If not, why do you think it is so?
14. After accessing childcare, has your economic situation changed?

Childcare Policies

15. Are you satisfied with the childcare services at CEPIA?
16. Do you have any suggestions on how CEPIA’s childcare services can be improved?
17. Do you have any suggestions on how childcare policies in general in Costa Rica, can help improve the economic situation of women in the future?

Concluding Remarks

18. Is there anything you would like to add to help me understand the relationship between free childcare and women’s economic opportunities in Costa Rica?
19. What is your dream for the future?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol – Caretakers at CEPIA

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? What is your role at CEPIA and how long have you worked here?

CEPIA’S Free Childcare

2. What is your experience and opinion of CEPIA’s free childcare programme?
3. From your perspective, how is the childcare programme affecting mother beneficiaries?
4. From your perspective, have mothers had more time to work or study after enrolling their children at CEPIA?
5. How long do mothers use CEPIA's free childcare services?
6. Do you have any suggestions on how CEPIA’s childcare programme can be improved?

Childcare Policies

7. Do you have any suggestions on how childcare policies in general in Costa Rica, can help improve the economic situation of mothers in the future?

Concluding Remarks

8. Is there anything you would like to add to help me understand the relationship between free childcare and women’s economic opportunities in Costa Rica?
9. What is your dream for the future?

Appendix C: Interview Protocol – Social Worker at the Technical Secretariat of the REDCUDI

1. Besides enabling mothers to work, is it an objective of the REDCUDI to also expand mothers’ work opportunities beyond part-time employment and low-income jobs?
2. Are there cases where families are reluctant to use the free childcare services?
3. In which parts of Costa Rica is the expansion of the REDCUDI’s childcare network more challenging?
4. Do you have any suggestions on how childcare policies in Costa Rica can be changed to help mothers improve their economic situation?