



Empowerment of Women Working Group

Policy Pathways towards a National Care Strategy

Dr Odile Mackett

This policy brief was commissioned by the Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ) in its capacity as a Resource Partner to the South African G20 Presidency.

Policy Pathways towards a National Care Strategy

Abstract:

The escalating global “care crisis,” intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the urgent need for systemic policy reform. This policy brief sets out the case for a National Care Strategy (NCS) as a comprehensive framework to unify fragmented initiatives, embed care into social and economic planning, and establish institutional, financial, and accountability mechanisms. Using the International Labour Organization’s 5Rs framework, recognising, reducing, redistributing, representing, and rewarding care work, the brief highlights the building blocks of an NCS and demonstrates how they can reposition care from a private burden to a public good. It reviews international experiences, notably from Brazil and Kenya, to illustrate pathways for institutional design, workforce development, infrastructure investment, and data collection. The brief also identifies the challenges of fragmented policy, underinvestment, and weak monitoring, and sets out opportunities for G20 countries to consolidate existing efforts, stimulate job creation, and close gender gaps. In doing so, it provides concrete policy pathways towards establishing a transformative NCS capable of advancing gender equality, inclusive growth, and social cohesion.

Keywords: National Care Strategy; care economy; 5Rs framework; gender equality; unpaid care work; social policy; labour markets; inclusive growth; G20.

1. Introduction and purpose of an NCS

The care economy has in recent decades gained international prominence in academic and policy debates. The need for reforms around care has become even more urgent following the UN's pronouncement of a "care crisis" prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the visible gaps in care infrastructure which the pandemic subsequently revealed (United Nations, 2020). The notion of a 'care economy' has also become central, and is defined by Valiani (2022, p. 3) as "a host of demands around the social organisation of care [...] which ranges from childcare services to care for the elderly, labour market regulations recognising workers' unpaid care duties, and pension coverage and salaries for homemakers", amongst others.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, care has gained increased visibility across many countries, reflected in policy measures such as conditional and unconditional social assistance initiatives, inclusive labour market programmes, and investments in care-supporting infrastructure; as is evident in countries like Australia, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Rwanda and Germany. While these efforts have contributed to improving care access and quality in individual sectors, they often remain fragmented and lack a unified vision. Few countries, save for a handful of examples, have advanced a *comprehensive* approach that recognises care as an integrated and cross-cutting policy domain. This gap is particularly pressing in the face of rising care needs and mounting fiscal pressures, especially those driven by global ageing. The current landscape of care, marked by increasing demands on both caregivers and care recipients, requires more deliberate and coordinated intervention. What is urgently required are policies that go beyond fragmented sectoral efforts, enabling governments and other stakeholders to adopt a centralised and integrated approach to care promotion and provision.

In this context, a comprehensive National Care Strategy (NCS) offers a practical tool that countries can use to respond to the current care crisis. The purpose of a NCS would be to provide an institutional architecture, financing, data, and accountability mechanism to make care visible and valued to policymakers. An effective NCS would embed care across all levels of government and departments, ensuring that the provision of care, the unequal distribution of unpaid care responsibilities, and the rising demand for care services are systematically recognised and addressed in policymaking processes. In doing so, it would move care from the margins to the core of social and economic planning.

Such a strategy would be central to gender-transformative economic recovery, job creation, human development, and social cohesion. The core components of a NCS include: legal foundation, inter-ministerial governance, care infrastructure, workforce development, data collection, monitoring frameworks, and budgeting. A well-supported care economy is thus something which is relevant to the entire population and a key component in creating equal opportunities for all inhabitants of a country.

This policy brief will provide an overview of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 5Rs framework to present the key building blocks of a successful National Care Strategy. Using this framework, the brief will draw on examples of countries which have successfully developed National Care Strategies, such as Kenya and Brazil. This will be followed by recommendations on how G20 countries could take concrete steps towards the development of an NCS.

2. Recognising, reducing, redistributing, representing and rewarding care work

The ILO has introduced the notion of decent care work with the 5Rs framework. These include the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work, rewarding and promoting decent care work and the increased representation of paid care workers (Addati et al., 2018). The framework also calls for a conducive policy environment which requires attention from a broad range of policy frameworks, with a specific focus on care policies, macroeconomic policies, social protection policies, labour policies, and migration policies (Addati et al., 2018).

The recognition of care work is a vital step in addressing challenges related to the care economy; both paid and unpaid care (Duffy et al., 2013). It has been widely established that the best way to ensure measurement of unpaid care is through the use of time use surveys (UN Women, 2021b, 2021a). These surveys, when used in conjunction with insights from labour force surveys, income and expenditure surveys, and household surveys, provide valuable information on the nature and quantity of unpaid work which takes place within the economy (Valiani, 2022). The case of Kenya is a fitting example, as the findings from their time-use survey provided vital information for their care needs assessment which ultimately informed the development of their national care policy (UN Women, 2023).

Although several challenges exist in relation to the funding and collection of standalone time use surveys,

the more recent establishment of light diaries provides a complimentary solution to ensuring a more regular and cheaper supply of time use data. Light diaries are designed to measure time spent on a limited number of pre-defined activities, which allows it to not only be collected more affordably, but it also ensures a less complex coding procedure in the analysis phase of the data production (ILO, 2018). Notwithstanding the limitations of light diaries, these data hold the potential to provide vital information related to SDG Indicator 5.4.1, and its appendage to existing household surveys allows for more frequent data points to be collected and supplemented by more comprehensive standalone time use surveys, which are typically collected every 5-10 years. Further related to measurement, through efforts of their G20 Presidency, Brazil has taken concrete steps toward viewing care as a disciplined and skilled practice rather than continuing the undervaluation of such work through the establishment of the “Thousand Women: Domestic Work and Care” project (IDWFED, n.d.). The project is aimed primarily at upskilling domestic workers and includes various initiatives to make them more visible.

Reducing care work is vital for ensuring the sustained well-being of those who are most likely to perform care work in service of the household – women and girls. There is overwhelming evidence of the effects a lack of physical infrastructure has on time use patterns, specifically those of women, girls and rural populations (Agénor & Agénor, 2023; Ilahi & Grimard, 2000). For instance, a study on Tanzania has shown that women and girls are overwhelmingly responsible for water and firewood collection, in a country where only 14% of households were reported to have electricity for lighting and only 4.5% of households had private tap water in their dwelling (Fontana & Natali, 2008). Furthermore, a baseline study conducted in Rwanda showed that households who received water tanks and access to an early childhood development centre saved between one and six hours per day on unpaid care work, while those who received energy-efficient cooking stoves saved between a day and six days in unpaid care work performed (UN Women, 2025). However, limited infrastructure is not only evident in households which lack running water and electricity, but also in the care provision of persons where educational and healthcare facilities are not in close proximity to households, or where there is an underinvestment in digital infrastructure. The work being performed in the absence of adequate infrastructure is thus more often than not classified as care work; making strategic infrastructure investment a key element of a successful NCS, as is demonstrated in the Kenyan National Care Policy (State Department for Gender and Affirmative Action, 2023). Access to infrastructure is also vital to efforts aimed at poverty and inequality reduction, highlighting the potential cross cutting nature of such investments not only in relation to the needs of a NCS, but also strategic government objectives highlighted in domestic policies and those related to goals of the African Union 2063 and the SDGs (African Union, 2015; United Nations, 2015).

Redistributing care work can ensure that the household is not unduly burdened with work which is of benefit to all in society. The focus on redistribution should not only be on the intrahousehold reallocation of care, but also the redistribution of care to other economic institutions. Razavi (2007) highlights the various ways in which care can be distributed between the household, the state, the market and the community sector. In various analyses, the balance of care work amongst these institutions reflects national strategies aimed at strategic economic goals (Choi, 2012; Haggard & Kaufman, 2009). Heavy reliance on the family and/or household is a historic feature of African and Asian welfare regimes (Peng, 2012; Yeni, 2024), however, this continued reliance on the household puts significant pressure on household members and runs counter to national development objectives, specifically in contexts of high unemployment and a reliance on informal sector employment. This redistribution is explicitly highlighted through the recognition of institutional actors involved in care beyond the household in Brazil. These include the state, the market and businesses, the community and organised civil society (Presidency of the Republic of Brazil, 2023). A NCS could provide a holistic understanding of care and all the stakeholders involved, as suggested by the care diamond, and embed care as a strategic goal across all government departments and functions.

The representation of care workers is a vital component of a comprehensive NCS. The increased casualisation and informalisation of work in many economies leave workers outside the ambit of labour laws and the ability to seek representation through union membership (Ossome, 2015). This casualisation is further reflected in the growing use of technology to obtain work through the gig economy (Nhleko, 2023). Care work has also become progressively procured on digital platforms, however, greater cooperation is needed between policy makers and the trade union movement to ensure that informal and casual workers enjoy the same labour protections as permanently employed workers (Hunt et al., 2019). Domestic workers are a particularly vulnerable group in this regard (ILO, 2013). Kenya’s National Care Policy has allowed for the identification of gaps within the labour law infrastructure for domestic workers, including the creation of a database of domestic workers, formal registration of such workers, and initiatives to promote the uptake of social security benefits (State Department for Gender and Affirmative Action, 2023). Similarly, Brazil has recognised priority audiences for their care strategy and these do not only include those receiving care (such as the elderly, children, and people with disabilities), but also those providing care both paid and unpaid (Presidency of the Republic of Brazil, 2023).

This recognition is aimed at ensuring that care is provided within the ambit of a set of cohesive principles, including ‘comprehensive care’, which not only applies to the standard of care being provided but also in the

conditions of work to which care workers are exposed.

Rewarding care work can draw workers into the sector and eliminate the poor labour market outcomes which tend to accompany care work. One of the key features of care work is that workers tend to be vulnerable to low wages. As it is seen as 'women's work', it is not just assumed to be performed without skill, but subject to the many conditions which leave women vulnerable in the labour market. Furthermore, care work is not easily scaled without compromising on the quality of such work (Valiani, 2022). Domestic workers are a primary example of such workers. Care work, specifically domestic work, is also typically performed by migrant workers, firstly, creating cross-border care chains (Parreñas, 2000), but also leaving care workers vulnerable to the ills which afflict migrant workers. A NCS could institutionalise support for paid care workers.

3. Challenges and opportunities towards an NCS

An NCS could be of benefit to several countries, as evidenced by the examples provided by Brazil and Kenya. In this section, we consider challenges and opportunities towards an NCS.

3.1. Challenges for the care economy

A key challenge related to the NCS is the lack of a coherent and comprehensive institutional framework. Care is fragmented across sectors and policy frameworks which lack a unified vision is a feature in several G20 countries, including South Africa, Mexico, and Canada. This results in the weak integration of care imperatives with national budgets, development plans and SDGs. The lack of a comprehensive institutional framework has resulted in advocacy and policy efforts in the care space which are designed around specific groups, such as efforts related to childcare services, or benefits for the elderly (Duffy et al., 2013). In Canada the lack of a framework for data sharing, for instance, created challenges in formulating a comprehensive response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Government of Canada, 2024). A unified policy framework could ensure more effective and sustainable care provision in the long term, but also better policy infrastructure in times of crisis.

Without an NCS, national care costing, fiscal space assessments, or the investment in data systems will remain a challenge. The lack of clear institutionalisation of mechanisms dedicated to the growth of and investment in the care economy, results in difficulty in directing investment to the infrastructure needed to ensure the care economy is recognised as a legitimate arm of the economy. Underinvestment in care is a key challenge in several countries around the world, including Indonesia and India (Comas-Herrera et al., 2025; World Bank, 2024). A NCS could provide a framework within which to ensure that resources are appropriately directed and allocated.

The absence of an overarching NCS reduces the opportunity to employ accountability mechanisms. The lack of a NCS means that separate entities (ministries, departments) are able to adopt and design policies without consideration of how the implementation of their programmes may affect the care economy and the people within it. Regular collection and analysis of quality data are thus a key component to understanding the scale and value which are provided in the economy. While many countries have implemented regular data collection, specifically through time use surveys (e.g., South Korea and Canada), many lack such periodic data collection (e.g., South Africa and Indonesia).

3.2. Opportunities and recommendations

Existing policies related to care can be consolidated through the design and adoption of an NCS. Various countries have policies which have institutionalised care and partly address some of the aspects of the 5R framework. Still, the lack of an overarching care framework presents a challenge for ensuring there is synergy between various policies which deal with care. However, this also represents an opportunity which can immediately be addressed through the design and adoption of an overarching NCS. This would consolidate the existing efforts which are currently spread across labour market policies, social protection policies, macroeconomic policies and migration policies. But also provide an opportunity to identify gaps which may exist in the institutional framework. Brazil's national care policy provides an illustration of such consolidation through their intersectoral care policy. The policy established an interministerial task team, consisting of almost 20 ministries, which was further divided into four chambers focussing on financing of care work, monitoring legislative discussions on care, a group to structure the work within the interministerial task team, and another to ensure the active participation of care workers, specifically domestic workers.

This structure acknowledges the inherent intersectoral nature of care policies and allows for coordinated sectoral actions and decisions which are underpinned by interaction between several stakeholders at various levels (Presidency of the Republic of Brazil, 2023).

Engage with low-hanging fruit for monitoring and evaluation of efforts. Many countries have established

infrastructure around labour force surveys which are overseen by well-established and reputable statistical agencies. Using these existing frameworks, light-dairies linked to labour force surveys provide a short-term solution to creating pathways for the more consistent implementation and investment in standalone time use surveys. But also, to allow for the more regular monitoring of efforts which would be driven through the NCS. Investment in such data could also assist in identifying key gaps in care provision as has been demonstrated by the inclusion of simplified or light time use diaries or pilots thereof into labour force and other household surveys, in countries such as Indonesia, Brazil, Lesotho, Malawi, Papua New Guinea, Zimbabwe, Moldova, and India (ILO, 2018, 2023).

Ensure adequate infrastructure investment. As many previous studies have established (discussed under reducing care work), investment in infrastructure to relieve households of grudge work is always a key solution in equality initiatives. Such investments not only hold the potential to increase the productivity of those who have to perform this work in addition to wage labour, but also frees up the time of those who may not already be engaged in the labour market. For children this could result in better schooling outcomes and for adults, this could encourage greater labour supply.

Encourage the growth of jobs within the care sector. Such a strategy would serve the dual purpose of ensuring that needed jobs are created and the necessary investment in the care economy is provisioned, both of which could have positive effects on GDP growth. This could be achieved by greater direct investment in the education and health sectors and identifying sectors which would need greater capacity to ensure the care economy is supported. It has been estimated that investment in the care economy has the potential to generate 203 million jobs in G20 countries by 2035, with most of these created in India and China (Pozzan & Chimedza, 2025). Further analyses of both low and high-income countries show that investment in the care economy has the potential to see employment growth of 5.5% in Europe and 7.5% in Africa, in addition to the narrowing, and even closing in some countries, of the gender employment gap (De Henau, 2022; De Henau et al., 2016). Investment in the care sector could thus allow countries to achieve multiple policy objectives and SDG targets, especially those related to employment growth, GDP growth, and gender equality goals.

4. Conclusion

An NCS offers a timely and transformative response to the growing demands of the care economy. As countries like Brazil and Kenya have shown, such a strategy can unify fragmented policy efforts, ensure investment in care infrastructure and jobs, and elevate care work as essential to national development. An NCS presents an opportunity to consolidate existing policies, embed care within economic and social planning, and reduce gendered inequalities rooted in unpaid and undervalued work. Central to this vision are the ILO's 5Rs, recognising, reducing, redistributing, rewarding, and representing care work, which provide a practical and principled foundation. With thoughtful policy design, targeted data collection, and sustained public investment, an NCS can drive inclusive economic growth, expand decent work, and uphold dignity for both caregivers and those in need of care.

References

- Addati, L., Cattaneo, U., Esquivel, V., & Valarino, I. (with International Labour Organization) (2018). Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work. International Labour Organization.
- African Union. (2015). [Agenda 2063: The Africa we want \(9789295104235\)](#).
- Agénor, P.-R., & Agénor, M. (2023). Access to infrastructure and women's time allocation: Implications for growth and gender equality. *Journal of Macroeconomics*, 75, 103472. DOI: [10.1016/j.jmacro.2022.103472](#)
- Choi, Y. J. (2012). End of the Era of Productivist Welfare Capitalism? Diverging Welfare Regimes in East Asia. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 40(3), 275–294. DOI: [10.1163/156853112X650827](#)
- Comas-Herrera, A., Cyhlarova, E., Rajagopalan, J., Govia, I., & Feng, Z. (2025). Financing of long-term care. In J. Cylus, G. Wharton, L. Carrino, S. Ilinca, M. Huber, & S. L. Barber (Eds.), *The Care Dividend: Why and How Countries Should Invest in Long-Term Care*. Cambridge University Press. 1st ed., 158–202. DOI: [doi.org/10.1017/9781009563444.005](#)
- De Henau, J. (2022). [Costs and benefits of investing in transformative care policy packages: A macrosimulation study in 82 countries](#) (ILO Working Paper). ILO.
- De Henau, J., Himmelweit, S., Lapniewska, Z., & Perrons, D. (2016). [Investing in the care economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries](#). UK Women's Budget Group.
- Duffy, M., Albelda, R., & Hammonds, C. (2013). Counting Care Work: The Empirical and Policy Applications of Care Theory. *Social Problems*, 60(2), 145–167. DOI: [10.1525/sp.2013.60.2.145](#)
- Fontana, M., & Natali, L. (2008). Gendered Patterns of Time Use in Tanzania: Public Investment in Infrastructure Can Help (Evaluating the Long-Term Impact of Gender-Focussed Policy Interventions).
- Government of Canada. (2024, October 10). [Report of the Expert Panel for the Review of the Federal Approach to Pandemic Science Advice and Research Coordination: The Time to Act is Now](#) [Research].
- Haggard, S., & Kaufman, R. R. (2009). Development, democracy and welfare states: Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe. Princeton University Press.
- Hunt, A., Samman, E., Tapfuma, S., Mwaura, G., Omenya, R., Kim, K., Stevano, S., & Roumer, A. (2019). [Women in the gig economy: Paid work, care and flexibility in Kenya and South Africa](#).
- IDWFED. (n.d.). [Brazil Recognizes Domestic Workers as the core of Its National Care Policy](#). Retrieved 25 June 2025,
- Ilahi, N., & Grimard, F. (2000). Public Infrastructure and Private Costs: Water Supply and Time Allocation of Women in Rural Pakistan. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 49(1), 45–75. DOI: [10.1086/452490](#)
- ILO. (2013). An overview of domestic work in Africa.
- ILO. (2018). Exploring light time-use approaches for measuring productive activities (1; What Counts?).
- ILO. (2023). [Own-use provision of services: Measurement guide](#). International Labor Organization.
- Nhleko, T. (2023). A Shift Towards Marginal Formalisation and Deepening Informalisation of Domestic Work Employment. *PEER REVIEW*, 96.
- Ossome, L. (2015). In search of the State? Neoliberalism and the labour question for pan-African feminism. *Feminist Africa*, 20, 6–25.
- Parreñas, R. S. (2000). Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers and the International Division of Reproductive Labor. *Gender and Society*, 14(4), 560–580.
- Peng, I. (2012). Social and political economy of care in Japan and South Korea. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 32(11/12), 636–649. DO: [10.1108/01443331211280683](#)
- Pozzan, E. & Chimedza, I. T. (2025). The 5Rs framework for decent work: Comprehensive guide for policy

options. Presentation to the G20 Empowerment of Women Working Group on 1 July 2025, Mpumalanga, South Africa.

Presidency of the Republic of Brazil. (2023). Federal Government—Participa + Brasil—Conceptual Framework for Brazil's National Care Policy.

Razavi, S. (2007). The Political and Social Economy of Care in a Development Context: Conceptual Issues, Research Questions and Policy Options (3; Gender and Development Programme, p. 50). United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

State Department for Gender and Affirmative Action. (2023). Kenya National Care Policy.

UN Women. (2025). Reducing and redistributing unpaid care work through care and services and infrastructure. Presentation to the G20 Empowerment of Women Working Group on 1 July 2025, Mpumalanga, South Africa.

UN Women. (2023). [Kenya: 2023 time-use survey report and care assessment \[Summary Brief\]](#).

UN Women. (2021a). Measuring time use: An assessment of issues and challenges in conducting time-use surveys with special emphasis on developing countries.

UN Women. (2021b). Quantifying care: Design and harmonization issues in time-use surveys. United Nations. (2015). Sustainable Development Goal 2015. United Nations, November, 2–8.

United Nations. (2020). [The Impact of Covid-19 on Women \(0939430010\)](#).

Valiani, S. (2022). The Africa care economy index. The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET).

World Bank. (2024). [The Care Economy in Indonesia: A Pathway for Women's Economic Participation and Social Well-being](#). Washington, DC: World Bank.

Yeni, S. (2024). Land, natural resources and the social reproduction of South Africa's 'relative surplus population'. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 24(3), e12584. DOI: [10.1111/joac.12584](#)