



# Prioritizing Care Services To Advance Women's Economic Empowerment

## About WeProsper

WeProsper is a global coalition that promotes women's economic empowerment (WEE) by engaging in strategic advocacy to advance gender equality, address structural barriers, and foster women's and girls' voice and power as economic actors. Together, we work to build and utilize the global evidence-base on women's economic empowerment using a feminist and intersectional approach to meaningfully inform global policy, increase funding for WEE, and support prosperity for women and girls in all their diversity.

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Care work has long been gendered across geographies and cultures around the world, with both domestic unpaid and more formal paid care responsibilities falling disproportionately on women<sup>1</sup> and girls, ultimately serving as a barrier to their overall empowerment and rights. This is particularly the case in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where 75 percent of unpaid care and domestic work is done by women, and where women end up providing up to 90 percent of long-term care, generally unpaid.<sup>2</sup> **The evidence is clear: if quality and affordable care services are provided and care needs are better addressed through policy and financing, women’s economic empowerment, justice, and rights will advance.**<sup>3</sup> To illustrate, the provision of high-quality childcare would reduce the global gender pay gap by 8.6 percent,<sup>4</sup> and an investment of 2.45 percent of GDP in long-term care could reduce gender employment gaps by 7.4 percent.<sup>5</sup>

COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated challenges that women face worldwide, particularly related to unpaid care work, and governments and donors began to make commitments on care.

Yet, these have not gone far enough; investments must increase and be better targeted to fully address the global care crisis and ensure progress toward a sustainable and inclusive economic recovery. As part of that, consideration of the underlying structural barriers to women’s economic empowerment within care work is critical. Solutions should build an enabling ecosystem for women, ensuring that unpaid care work is recognized by governments, reduced through quality and affordable service provision, and redistributed across society, and paid care work is rewarded with more decent work and represented through labor unions.

To support policy action, this brief outlines takeaways from a recent research synthesis on care services conducted by WeProsper around childcare and long-term care (LTC), which encompasses eldercare and care for those with disabilities, and makes key recommendations for policymakers and donors seeking to advance global women’s economic empowerment (WEE).



## 5Rs of Care<sup>6,7</sup>

**Recognizing, Redistributing, and Reducing** unpaid care work, such as:

- Taking unpaid care into account in decision making, budgeting, and data collection
- Equitably distributing care responsibilities between women and men from the household to public sector
- Reducing unpaid care tasks to open up more time for the political, economic, and social participation of women and girls who traditionally shoulder the disproportionate share of the care burden

**Rewarding and Representing** paid care work, such as:

- Ensuring decent work and equal pay for equal work
- Promoting adequate remuneration, representation, and freedom of association for paid care workers

## Key Findings from Research Synthesis<sup>8</sup>

- Governments have a central role in providing the essential service of quality, affordable, and accessible care. However, investments in care services are not prioritized in many countries, and LMICs often face resource constraints that would be necessary for provision of such services, particularly given the economic impacts of COVID-19.
- Women perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work, and this unequal distribution of responsibilities impacts their ability to access and retain jobs, results in longer work hours, and undermines their overall well-being.<sup>9,10</sup> Investments in affordable quality childcare and LTC would help reduce and redistribute this care work, while supporting women's ability to engage in paid work.
- **Investments in care services do not only advance gender equality and support well-being; they are a strategic economic policy decision that generates growth and significant employment, particularly for women, and would be partially offset by tax revenues.**

Investments in care services can generate more employment and offer greater poverty and gender wage gap reduction than traditional infrastructure investments, thus promoting shared prosperity and economic growth.

- Providing quality and affordable childcare is a highly effective way to support WEE, but there are large provision gaps worldwide, particularly in LMICs.<sup>11</sup> **Globally, 350 million children under primary school age lack access to needed care, 80 percent of which are in LMICs.** There is a wide range of expenditures needed to fill these gaps, from 1.1 percent of GDP in some, mostly high-income, countries to up to 14 percent of GDP in others. Filling these gaps would generate a range of benefits for women, such as higher labor force participation, new job opportunities, reduced pay gap, and increased household income.

- Unpaid LTC responsibilities pose significant constraints for WEE; yet, compared to childcare, there are fewer investments around LTC despite the benefits and that 80 percent of those with disabilities are located in LMICs.<sup>12,13</sup> In some LMIC countries, there is no domestic financing for LTC services even where the population is rapidly aging.<sup>14</sup>
- Donor investments in childcare and LTC have been narrow and limited thus far. For example, funding that is specific to childcare programs and services is rare through both bilateral development assistance and funding by multilateral development banks, and donor programming for LTC services is even more limited. An exception is the World Bank's new *Invest in Childcare* initiative, which demonstrates promising government investments around childcare that will begin to fill childcare gaps in some contexts.
- Care-related social protections and employment and leave policies that are gender-transformative, such as paid parental leave, are key components of care policy packages which support WEE outcomes. There are large gaps globally between state or employer provision and optimal coverage, which includes universal, free or low-cost, gender-responsive, and quality services.

### WeProsper's Definition of Women's Economic Empowerment:

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is the transformative process and outcome which allows women to increase their real power and assert their agency in society and achieve equal access to and control over skills, assets, resources, opportunities, decision-making, and bargaining power. Critical to this process is creating an enabling environment by ensuring agency and choice for women and girls and addressing structural economic factors that impede gender equality, including in the labor market and creating a more equitable distribution of unpaid care work.

## Recommendations for Policymakers and Donors

**Prioritize domestic investments in childcare and LTC, within available resources.** Governments are duty-bearers with an obligation to ensure equitable access to care. Thus, policymakers should prioritize and expand domestic investments in childcare and LTC to fill existing gaps. These investments will help countries to reach UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets and achieve universal coverage, meaning quality care services for all that need them. Such services should be free or low-cost and ensure the needs of the lowest income and most vulnerable groups are met. Context-specific interventions are important, and governments should draw on evaluations of programming that improve WEE outcomes to determine the best policy approach.

**Supplement domestic care financing through donor investment.** To supplement domestic investments, donors, including international financial institutions and high-income countries that provide development assistance, should prioritize investments in childcare and LTC to support WEE, as well as broader development objectives. Donors should create more programs focused on childcare and LTC, working with governments and civil society to support existing programs and address the needs of the most vulnerable. If successful, donors can build on initiatives like *Invest in Childcare* to fill care gaps.

**Focus on WEE in the provision of LTC and childcare services.** In considering how to develop transformative care policies, policymakers should acknowledge how care responsibilities impact women and those they care for in multiple ways at different points in their lives, resulting in lower lifetime earnings and less financial stability in retirement for women. To reduce the burden on women and support the care and well-being of all populations from birth to death, governments should consider implementing policies that embrace a gender-responsive lifecycle approach to care that support broader goals of universal care provision and social protections.

Further, programs should incorporate intersectional needs and impact assessments, focusing on key factors that affect women's ability and willingness to use careservices, including accessibility, quality, and affordability.

**Support ILO Conventions that advance protections for care workers.** Governments should also pursue policies and support ILO Conventions that have been shown to support gender-equitable economic outcomes, such as paid maternity, family, and medical leave. Examples include ILO Convention 190, focused on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work, and Convention 189, extending basic labor rights to domestic workers.

**Perform an assessment of care gaps, and track progress and impacts on WEE.** To determine care gaps, if not already done, an assessment of the care coverage gaps, costs, and economic returns should be performed by utilizing available policy tools such as UN Women's *Guide to Public Investments in the Care Economy*.<sup>15</sup> Ongoing assessment to track and measure progress and determine areas for improvement is also critical and can be performed using

## Conclusion

As the world builds back from COVID-19, tackles new crises and demographic shifts, and simultaneously works to ensure economic justice and rights for women and girls, a policy focus on care services is essential. Governments and donors have a critical role to play and can utilize the extensive evidence-base to design policies and investment strategies that effectively recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work and reward and represent paid care work.

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