

IN BRIEF

EVALUATION OF UN WOMEN'S WORK ON THE CARE ECONOMY IN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA



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Background

Care work — both paid and unpaid — forms the backbone of economies across East and Southern Africa. Women are responsible for the majority of this work. On average, women and girls spend 3.4 times more hours on unpaid care work than men, limiting their opportunities for education, employment, and leadership.¹ Meanwhile, paid care sectors —including domestic workers— is typically poorly remunerated and often takes place under precarious and informal conditions.² These dynamics reinforce further challenges for women's social and economic wellbeing, gender inequality and undermines inclusive development.

Despite policy commitments, investment in care systems remains insufficient, fragmented, and poorly measured.³ UN Women has elevated care as a strategic priority through its Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy (2024), using the TransformCare Gender Equality Accelerator (GEA) to guide its 5R+ approach: Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, and Represent care work. In this approach, UN Women also advocates for the sufficient Resourcing of resilient care systems.

Between 2018 and 2024, UN Women carried out 36 initiatives targeting the care economy in the East and Southern Africa region. The majority of these initiatives targeted caregivers, care recipients, governments and intergovernmental institutions. Around 5 per cent targeted the business sector, men and boys, and people with disabilities.

Methodology

The evaluation took a developmental, learning-oriented approach. It drew on mixed methods: document and portfolio review, three in-depth country case studies (Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania), a survey of Women's Economic Empowerment focal points, and 142 stakeholder interviews. It reviewed the 36 mapped programmes against UN Women's TransformCare theory of change to identify opportunities to strengthen programming going forward.

Key Messages and Findings

UN Women's leadership on care is well recognized—yet to accelerate progress, a more strategic and focused approach is now required.

Governments and partners recognize UN Women's leadership on care through its work in research, advocacy, and convening. Practical tools—such as the costing tool co-created with the ILO—have supported governments to take greater ownership of care policy and planning. These contributions have elevated UN Women's role as a thought leader and positioned care more centrally within national policy agendas. While progress has been made, efforts to advance the care agenda have varied in scale and sustainability.. To increase impact, UN Women must clarify its comparative advantage.

¹ International Labour Organization (ILO). (2018). [Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#). Geneva: ILO.

² UN Women. (2023). *The Care Agenda: A regional perspective for East and Southern Africa.* UN Women East and Southern Africa Regional Office.

³ International Labour Organization (ILO). (2018). [Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#). Geneva: ILO.

UN Women adds greatest value in thought leadership, data, advocacy and piloting promising approaches.

From care assessments, time-use surveys to costing tools co-developed with the ILO, UN Women's evidence-based tools have driven policy conversations. In contrast, some small-scale infrastructure projects such as child-care centres have lacked sustainability and clear rationale. For example, a UN Women programme in Tanzania faced challenges when newly built care centres remained unused because mothers could not afford the fees. These experiences highlight the need for stronger needs assessments, financial viability planning, and meaningful community engagement. As a UN entity, UN Women's strength is in generating evidence, including from pilots, fostering dialogue, and advocating for systems change—encouraging others, particularly governments, to deliver and sustain services. Its comparative advantage lies in convening stakeholders, shaping systems, and advocating for others to deliver stronger services at scale.

An intersectional, systems approach enables cross-sectoral impact.

UN Women's intersectional and life-course framing allows care work to be integrated across social protection, economic development, humanitarian response and climate adaptation. This provides an important entry point for partnerships with other actors, including UNICEF on childcare, ILO on employment, and IOM on migrant care workers. Such collaborations enhance coherence and provide opportunities to align technical expertise with broader policy and institutional reforms.

Policy influence and partnerships are delivering results — but challenges persist in achieving scale and sustainability.

UN Women has helped establish national care policies, expand childcare services, and shift social norms in communities. However, short-term projects, limited follow-through, and lack of sustainability strategies have often undermined longer-term change. Future success will depend on its ability to scale effective models, strengthen regional collaboration including with regional economic communities to advance normative frameworks, and reinforce coordination and knowledge exchange platforms.

Gaps in measurement limit UN Women's ability to fully capture and communicate its impact. UN Women's ability to fully capture and communicate its impact in the care economy has been constrained by key measurement

gaps—due in part to the absence of a comprehensive results framework and the fact that care-related interventions were often embedded within broader programmes rather than standalone initiatives. As a result, few programmes measure shifts in time use or employment, and norm change and the effects of policy change remain poorly tracked. Measurement systems, including but not limited to time-use surveys, need urgent investment and broader adoption. The new Global Transform Care Programme provides a framework for more concrete tracking.

Norms-focused programming is needed — and needs a longer-term, context-specific and integrated lens.

Changing social norms around caregiving takes time. Yet most interventions are often short-term and rarely incorporate mechanisms to assess sustained change. Long-term investment and stronger donor messaging are needed to sustain momentum. A context-specific approach to social norms around care is essential to reflect diverse cultural and geographical contexts and bolster the likelihood of community ownership. To date, social norms programming has mainly been at the community level and often operated separately from efforts to improve care infrastructure, service quality and the availability of paid caregivers. Integrating efforts to shift social norms with programming to address material needs is key, building on the UN Women social norms framework.

Adopting the 5R+ framework was an important step. Strengthening the consistency and comprehensiveness of delivery on it is the next step.

While the adoption of the 5R+ framework marks important progress—and recent efforts have increased attention to strengthening decent work in the paid care sectors and the resourcing of care systems—the review found that implementation remains uneven. Paid care and engagement with the private sector, in particular, remain underdeveloped areas requiring more targeted attention. Efforts to strengthen creation of decent jobs in the care sector through working with caregivers, care receives and employers must be scaled up and better integrated across care programming. Drawing on the new Global Transform Care programme framework as a foundation, UN Women offices in East and Southern Africa can leverage the experiences of other regional and country UN Women offices in developing innovative ways to capture and use care data to catalyze policy change and investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Focus on systems change.

Refocus on research, advocacy, and policy engagement. Support governments and partners to deliver services.

2

Advance the full 5R+ agenda, especially paid care.

Building on the Global Transform Care Programme and Corporate Social Norms Framework, expand the care agenda to more fully address paid care, including through engagement with labour ministries, unions, and employers.

3

Embed care across thematic areas.

Position care as a cross-cutting issue linked to social protection, GBV, migration, climate and crisis response.

4

Invest in better measurement.

Integrate care indicators in programme design, track outcomes like time use and employment

5

Strengthen regional coordination and visibility.

Create platforms for knowledge exchange and partner engagement, including with regional economic communities.

6

Make norms change central.

Support norm change by engaging both institutions and communities through complementary strategies. Combine norm-shifting strategies with policy and infrastructure efforts. Integrate strategies to shift norms across more care programming where relevant.

Disclaimer: The analysis and recommendations of this brief are those of the UN Women Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services (IEAIS) and do not necessarily reflect the views of UN Women. This is an independent publication by the UN Women Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services (IEAIS).

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