

Intersecting Inequalities and the Redistributive Power of the Care Economy

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Abstract

This paper highlights how investing in the care economy, a crucial yet often ignored part of society can make a real difference in reducing income inequality in Nigeria. The care economy is made up of all the everyday work both paid and unpaid that helps families and communities thrive. It is the quiet constant effort of looking after children, tending to elderly parents, providing health support, and managing daily household needs. This work is the backbone of society, yet it's often taken for granted. The care economy rarely shows up in national budgets or policy plans, and when included, is usually underfunded and undervalued. The people, mostly women, who do this vital work are too often overlooked, even though their efforts keep everything else running. In Nigeria, income inequality is made worse by deep gender gaps in the workforce. Women and girls carry the bulk of unpaid care responsibilities, which limits their chances to work, earn, and advance economically. This imbalance reinforces broader social and economic inequalities. Attempts were made to argue that meaningful investment in care infrastructure such as childcare centres, eldercare homes, and healthcare facilities along with better pay and training for care workers, can drive real change. Such investment not only creates jobs, especially for women, but also frees up time for caregivers to pursue education, work, or entrepreneurship. The impact of investing in care work creates a ripple effect fostering more inclusive economic growth and advancing gender equality. When care is recognised as real, valuable work, and when governments back it with proper funding and supportive policies, the benefits extend to everyone. This holds especially true for Nigeria, where the need for meaningful change is both urgent and far-reaching. The paper ends with practical recommendations for Nigerian policymakers to better support caregivers and invest in systems that make care work visible, valued, and sustainable. By doing so, the country can make serious progress toward a fairer, more equal future.

Keywords: Care economy, job creation, inequality, poverty, economic growth

JEL classification: I11, I28, I14, I38, J78, I32

1. 0 Introduction and Rationale

Income inequality continues to be a stubborn challenge in many developing countries (Van Der Hoeven, 2019), and Nigeria is no exception. While efforts to close the gap have taken various forms, one powerful solution called the care economy has often been overlooked. In recent years, it has gained attention as a crucial though still underused way to tackle deep-rooted inequality. By recognising and investing in the everyday care work that supports families and communities, Nigeria has an opportunity to create fairer, more inclusive growth that benefits everyone (Dasgupta, 2024). Care work encompassing both unpaid domestic labour and paid caregiving roles is a foundational element of every economy. However, it remains undervalued, and women, who perform much of this work, are disproportionately poorly remunerated or go entirely unpaid. This study is driven by a growing global understanding that investing in care services brings powerful, far-reaching benefits a triple win. First, it helps reduce gender inequality by easing the unpaid care burden that mostly falls on women. Second, it opens up real opportunities for more people, especially women, to take part in the economy. And third, it helps bridge the income gap by creating decent jobs and supporting fairer wages. In short, when we take care work seriously and invest in it, everyone stands to gain.(Mpofu, 2023). This piece examines how strategic investment in the care economy can contribute meaningfully to reducing income inequality, particularly in contexts where state support and recognition of care work remain limited.

Nigeria is assumed to be Africa's most populous country and largest economy by GDP, yet, continues to face high and persistent levels of income inequality (Sohn, 2020). According to the World Bank (2022), Nigeria's Gini coefficient a key measure of income inequality was 35.1, highlighting deep and troubling divides. These gaps aren't just between the wealthy and the poor or between urban and rural communities; they also show up starkly between men and women, and

from one region to another. Behind the numbers are real stories of families struggling to get by, young people shut out of opportunity, and women shouldering unequal burdens making the case for urgent, inclusive action more pressing. A key factor that gets overlooked in explaining these inequalities is the ongoing underinvestment in the care economy. Care economy encompasses both paid and unpaid work involved in vital caregiving tasks such as childcare, eldercare, health services, and domestic work that are essential to the well-being of households and communities (UN Women, 2018). Globally, women perform over 75% of unpaid care work, and in Nigeria where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched this proportion is even higher (ILO, 2018). Time-use studies, although limited in Nigeria, consistently show that women spend significantly more time than men on unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, which limits their engagement in income-generating activities and contributes to entrenched gendered poverty (Adeyeye, Fabusoro, Sodiya, & Fapojuwo, 2021). Despite

playing a vital role in both the economy and society, Nigeria's care economy remains is not visible in national budgets and policy frameworks (Bakre, McCartney, & Fayemi, 2022). There is little public investment in essential care services like early childhood education, maternal health, eldercare, or professional caregiving. Instead, most of this work falls on the shoulders of women and girls unpaid, undervalued, and often under harsh conditions (Hunt & Samman, 2023). This not only traps many in low-paid, insecure work, rather fuels a cycle of hardship that passes from one generation to the next. Yet, it does not have to be this way. Experiences from other countries in the Global South show just how powerful care investments can be transforming lives, boosting economies, and breaking down long-standing barriers. Nigeria has the chance to follow this path, but it requires serious recognition and real action. For example, a study by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC, 2016) found that investing 2% of GDP in the care sector could create

over 13 million jobs in developing countries many of them for women. Similarly, countries such as Uruguay and Costa Rica have developed national care systems that have led to increased female labour force participation, income growth, and reductions in inequality (Filgueira & Martínez Franzoni, 2019).

In Nigeria, care-related jobs are mostly informal and lack basic protections like minimum wages, job security, and social benefits (Fajemidagba, 2024). Public services such as childcare centers, after-school programs, and eldercare facilities are few and far between especially in low-income and rural areas (Halpern, 1999). This gap in support places a heavy, unpaid care burden on women and girls, while also deepening wider income inequalities by limiting the economic opportunities and earning potential of a large part of the population, because of this, the paper argues that investing meaningfully in Nigeria's care economy offers a practical and powerful way to tackle income inequality and create lasting developmental change. By recognizing, redistributing, and rewarding care work both paid and unpaid Nigeria can simultaneously address gender disparities, create decent employment opportunities, and support inclusive economic growth. This work draws from a rich body of global and regional research, unpacks labour and policy data, and puts forward practical, evidence-based recommendations. Its goal is simple but urgent, to make sure the care economy becomes a better part of Nigeria's development plans not as an afterthought but as a core pillar. By weaving care work into national strategies, we can begin to shift it from an invisible burden carried mostly by women to a recognised and valued force for sustainable growth and social progress.

2.0 Conceptual Literature

A growing number of studies point to just how transformative the care economy can be in building fairer, more inclusive societies. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) estimates that with the right investments, care services could generate up to 475 million jobs globally by 2030 a staggering figure that shows the scale of opportunity. Research from UN Women and the OECD also reinforces this, showing that when care services are affordable and accessible, more women are able to join the workforce, time poverty is reduced, and incomes are shared more broadly across society (Ferrant & Thim, 2019). Real-world examples bring these numbers to life. In Latin America, Uruguay's National Integrated Care System has already shown how thoughtful public investment in care can boost employment and strengthen social inclusion. These lessons carry a powerful message for countries like Nigeria: valuing care is not just the right thing to do but a smart economic strategy with real, lasting impact (Goyeneche, Lara, de Sierra, & Plá, 2025). However, most literature indicates a significant implementation gap, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where national policies often fail to prioritize care work or social care infrastructure (Derkyi-Kwarteng, Agyepong, Enyimayew, & Gilson, 2021). What is more, there's a noticeable gap in the research when it comes to Nigeria.

While the global evidence is strong, very few studies have explored how investing in care directly affects income inequality within the Nigerian context. This lack of local data makes it harder for policymakers to see the full picture or to realise just how much potential lies in supporting the care economy. If Nigeria is serious about creating a fairer and more inclusive society, then investing in the care economy must be a priority. From childcare and eldercare to health services, both paid

and unpaid care work forms the backbone of everyday life. Gaining recognition among scholars and policymakers, this sector is now seen as a powerful force for reducing inequality and building a more just, people-centred economy (Peters, 2024). The literature defines the care economy as the system of labour, both paid and unpaid, that supports the physical, emotional, and developmental needs of individuals, including childcare, eldercare, health care, and domestic work (Folbre, 2006; Razavi, 2007). According to Post (2018), scholars and international agencies alike argue that care work is the invisible foundation of all other economic activity, yet remains grossly undervalued in national accounts, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. When looking at unpaid care work, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) found that women around the world spend three to six times more hours on unpaid care and domestic tasks than men. This heavy, unequal burden often keeps women from fully joining the formal workforce, limits their chances to earn income, and deepens systemic income inequality (Kabeer, 2021).

In Nigeria, this gendered division of labour is especially pronounced, though comprehensive time-use data is lacking (Eissler, Heckert, Myers, Seymour, Sinharoy, & Yount, 2021). Still, anecdotal and sector-specific studies suggest that Nigerian women spend a significant portion of their day performing unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks, often at the expense of wage employment or education (UN Women Nigeria, 2020). The economic benefits of investing in the care economy are increasingly documented. De Henau et al. (2016) modelled the impact of investing 2% of GDP in the care sector in several OECD and non-OECD countries and found that it would generate significantly more employment than equivalent investments in construction or transportation infrastructure. In sub-Saharan Africa, supporting care work through public programmes does far more than help individual families; it sets off a ripple effect of positive change. Research shows that when care services receive proper

backing, they create more jobs, boost household incomes, and empower women to take a fuller part in economic and social life (Budlender & Moussié, 2013). These are not just abstract ideas but are proven realities.

A powerful example comes from Uruguay, where in 2015 the government took a bold and pioneering step by launching the National Integrated Care System (SINA). This programme recognised care not just as an individual or family duty, but as a collective responsibility shared by society. The initiative reshaped the way care is valued and delivered making services more accessible, thereby creating new job opportunities and advancing gender equality. For countries like Nigeria, that might want to build fairer and more inclusive societies, Uruguay's experience offers valuable lessons on how investing in care can drive real social and economic progress. Care economy initiative not only improved access to care services but help to create jobs and promote gender equality. Innovations like these offer valuable lessons for countries like Nigeria, showing what's possible when care work is treated with the respect and investment it deserves. The system expanded access to early childhood education, eldercare, and services for people with disabilities, while also professionalizing care work and increasing state support for families. Evaluations of the SINA program noted improvements in women's labour market participation and a measurable reduction in income inequality (ECLAC, 2020).

In the African context, literature remains scarce but growing, this is as Valiani, (2022) and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) emphasize the need for care-centred recovery strategies, especially in the post-COVID-19 era (Pérez-Rugosa, de Lorena-Quintal, Domínguez-Valdés, Rodríguez-Rodríguez, Núñez-Castro, Suárez-Fernández, & Sarabia-Cobo, 2024). Moreover, experts call for focused public investment in social care infrastructure as a way to boost productivity and narrow the gaps in gender and income inequality. Nigeria often stands out in these

discussions because of its unique challenges and opportunities. With a larger youth population, many women, low levels of formal employment, and high numbers of dependents, the country has enormous untapped potential. Investing in care could unlock this potential, creating jobs, supporting families, and building a more balanced and prosperous society. (Edewor, Kollie, & Olaoye, 2023). Although the care economy plays a crucial role, it remains largely disconnected from Nigeria's overall development strategies (Ezeudu & Fadeyi, 2024). This fragmented approach means that the immense potential of the care economy to foster social and economic growth is still largely overlooked and underutilized. (Imam, 2023). However, Anteneh (2023) summarized that there is not enough research showing how investing in care services can directly help shrink income gaps in Nigeria. Because of this, many people might not realize just how important this work is for creating real, positive change. This essay steps in to fill that gap bringing attention to a vital part of our economy that often goes unnoticed but has the power to make a real difference in people's everyday lives.

2.1. Building the Care Economy in Nigeria: Addressing Systemic Deficits

While Nigeria has made progress in areas such as health and education through policies like the National Health Policy and Universal Basic Education Act, there is no integrated strategy addressing care as a multi-dimensional issue (Ewurum, & Okafor, 2024; Oweibia, Elemuwa, Akpan, Daniel, Oruikor, Tarimobowei, & Babatunde, 2024). But Oyewo (2021) summarized that existing government programs, such as the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), which includes conditional cash transfers and school feeding schemes, have some indirect benefits for caregivers. However, they are fragmented, underfunded, and lack a care-centred lens. For instance, there are limited public investments in Childcare services (Sani, & Yaqub, 2024). Most urban areas

lack public childcare facilities, forcing women to rely on informal or family arrangements (Moussié, (2021). In corroboration, Nnadi, Ossai and Nwokocha (2024) concluded that in rural areas, these services are nearly non-existent. As life expectancy increases, the care needs of elderly populations rise (Meinow, Jasilionis, Oksuzyan, Sundberg, Kelfve, & Wastesson, 2022). Yet, Nigeria lacks a national framework for long-term eldercare (Oyinlola, 2024).

Professionalization of care work:

Domestic workers and informal care providers often lack job protections, minimum wages, or training opportunities (Eyongndi, Imosemi, & Nnawulezi, 2024), because most paid care work in Nigeria such as domestic help, nannies, and home caregivers in the informal sectors are underpaid, and unregulated. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reports that women dominate low-wage service sectors, including domestic work, but lack access to social protection schemes (Onyimadu, 2021). In a similar vein, Rodríguez-Modroño, Agenjo-Calderón and López-Igual, (2022), stated that without legal frameworks to formalize and protect care workers, the sector perpetuates exploitation. Explicit government policy on care economy investment has major implications (Onaran & Oyvat, 2023), because, it limits women's economic participation, especially among low-income and rural populations, it deepens intergenerational poverty, as families without access to care services must sacrifice income or education opportunities, it misses an opportunity for job creation, as the care income inequality and labour.

The absence of sector has high potential for absorbing labor, particularly among women and youth. Without deliberate efforts to measure, recognize, and invest in the care economy, Nigeria risks reinforcing entrenched inequalities and missing out on inclusive, sustainable economic growth (Igechi, Efanodor-Obeten, & Atoe, 2025). Much of the care work whether it is looking after children, supporting the elderly, or caring for people with disabilities is

done informally and without pay, mostly by women. Meanwhile, the heavy, unseen load of unpaid care limits women's ability to join the workforce, hold onto financial independence, and ultimately deepens the gender inequalities that persist in society. In many communities across the country, public support for essential care services like affordable childcare, eldercare, and healthcare is either hard to find or simply does not exist. Social protection systems are weak, and there is very little government effort to formalize and professionalize care work. The care jobs that are available often come with low pay, little regulation, and almost no social security, leaving the people who do this vital work vulnerable and undervalued.

These gaps highlight the urgent need for targeted policies and investments that recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care responsibilities, while also creating decent jobs within the care sector. Addressing these issues would not only promote gender equality but also boost productivity, support economic diversification, and contribute to inclusive development in Nigeria. However, in Nigeria, the care economy remains one of the most underrecognized yet essential aspects of society (Alaye & Ogunbanwo, 2024), it is the foundation upon which families and communities function, encompassing the unpaid and paid work that supports children, the elderly, the sick, and people with disabilities (Carmichael, & Clarke, 2022). However, care work is largely invisible in policy, economic planning, and public discourse (Lavee & Kaplan, 2022), as much of the burden of care in Nigeria is carried by women and girls, often without pay or recognition. Everyday home tasks and caring for the sick are viewed as a simple part of what it means to be a woman rather than a relevant economic contributions (Finch & Groves, 2022), a perception that places a heavy and unfair burden on women's time and energy, leaving them with fewer opportunities to pursue education, paid work, or entrepreneurship. As a result, these expectations trap many women in ongoing cycles of inequality and economic dependence. In rural

areas and low-income urban communities, the pressure is even greater, as public support systems are minimal or absent. Formal care services remain hard to come by (Sykora, 2024). Affordable, high-quality childcare centers are few and mostly found in large cities, while infrastructure for eldercare is even more limited (Wang, Zhu, Bu, & Zhang, 2024). On top of this, Alajlan (2024) highlights how the healthcare system is stretched thin, underfunded, and unevenly distributed across regions, making it especially tough for families to get the support they need particularly when caring for their most vulnerable members.

When the state does not provide care services, families have no choice but to rely on themselves. This often forces women into a tough choice between looking after their families and earning a livelihood (Gorman, 2017). And even when they are paid for care work, it usually takes place in informal settings where there's little oversight or protection leaving them vulnerable and unsupported. (De Vita & Ciarini, 2025). As Yamane (2022) highlights, domestic workers, nannies, and private caregivers often endure long hours for low wages, frequently without contracts, legal rights, or social benefits. Many of these workers are young women or migrants who fall outside labour protections and face harsh conditions sometimes even abuse and exploitation making their work both undervalued and vulnerable. In the work of Women (2018), the lack of formal recognition keeps care jobs undervalued, limiting their potential to drive economic growth and provide decent livelihoods.

The policy environment in Nigeria does little to address or improve this situation as care-related issues are scattered across different ministries and agencies, without a unified strategy or framework (Ogbenna, Caputo, Onyeka, Ohanete, Johnson, Sam-Agudu & Doobay-Persaud, 2025). As worrying as this situation is, there is currently no national system to track unpaid care work, which means this essential labor remains invisible in official statistics and all too often, it is

overlooked when policies are made (Pérez-Rugosa et al., 2024). While some labor laws provide maternity leave support for paternity leave or shared parenting responsibilities are scarce, obvious lack of recognition reinforces traditional gender roles and deepens inequalities, both at home and in the workplace. Neglect of the care economy represents a missed opportunity for Nigeria (Abah, 2022). Investing in care infrastructure and services could be a game-changer for Nigeria. It has the potential to create thousands of much-needed jobs particularly for women and young people. More importantly, it would free up time for women to take part in the workforce, raise household incomes, and give the overall economy a real boost. It's not just smart policy it is a pathway to a more inclusive and productive future.

Expanding access to early childhood education, eldercare, and health services is not just about meeting immediate needs it is a crucial investment in the long-term development of people, a powerful way to reduce poverty, and a foundation for stronger, more connected communities (Wang, Coyte, Shi, Zong, & Zhong, 2023). At its heart, care work is not just about meeting social needs it is a fundamental economic issue (Robinson, 2006). If Nigeria continues to overlook the care economy, it risks deepening gender inequality, depending too heavily on informal and unprotected labour, and failing to unlock the full potential of its people. Recognising and investing in care is not just the right thing to do it is essential for the country's growth and future. Also, according to Henn and Chen (2024), recognizing and investing in care is critical for building a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous society.

In Nigeria, the distribution of care workers tells a quiet yet powerful story about inequality, one that affects the lives of millions, often without recognition (Nwankwo, Ugwu, Nwankwo, Akpoke, Anyigor, Obi-Nwankwo, & Spicer, 2022). Noting that care workers, whether it is a nurse tending to the sick in a clinic, a nanny looking after a child, or a daughter staying home from school

to care for a sick parent, are not evenly spread across the country. In the more affluent parts of Nigeria, particularly in cities like Lagos or Abuja, care workers are more readily available. Here, hospitals, daycare centers, and private homes often have access to trained caregivers. These are also the places where families can afford to pay for help. But move outside the cities, and the picture changes dramatically. In rural communities or under-resourced regions, particularly in parts of northern Nigeria, formal care services are often scarce or nonexistent (Nwokoro, Ugwa, Ekenna, Obi, & Onwuliri, 2022). Hospitals are understaffed, qualified caregivers are few and when a child or elderly person needs support, the responsibility almost always falls to a family member, usually a woman or a girl, it is not uncommon for girls in rural areas to miss out on school because they have to stay home to care for younger siblings or sick relatives. According to Callard (2018), their dreams, like becoming a teacher or a nurse themselves one day, get quietly delayed or disappear altogether.

Even among professional care workers such as nurses, aides, and home-based caregivers inequality persists (Milkman, 2023). Most of them are women, and many are poorly paid, working long hours without benefits or protections. These women often support entire families, yet their contributions are treated as low-skilled labour (Farris & Bergfeld, 2023). Women do so much to keep our families, communities, and economies going; yet, their work often goes unseen, unappreciated, and unsupported. Meanwhile, people in poorer communities suffer the most, because if a child falls ill in a remote village, there may be no trained health worker nearby. When an elderly woman needs support, her family may have no one else to turn to. In these cases, care becomes both a necessity and a burden borne quietly, unpaid, and often invisibly, by the women and girls around them. It is more than an issue of unfair distribution; it is a loss of talent, hope, and opportunities that could move us all forward (Elson, 2017). Nigeria is home to compassionate and

hardworking individuals who care for others every day. But without investing in training, infrastructure, and policies that recognize and support care work especially in the places that need it most, the country continues to overlook the very people holding families and communities together. As Razavi (2007) powerfully puts it, when we truly recognize care work when we value it and make it accessible, we begin to lay the groundwork for a more compassionate and fair economy, one where care is no longer viewed as a private burden or a privilege for the few, but as a collective responsibility that lifts everyone.

3.0 Statistical Overview

Impact of the Care Economy in Less Developed Economies

| Category | Indicator / Metric | Data / Value | Country / Region |
|--------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| Employment Impact | Employment increase from care investments | Up to 11% of total employment | Various LDCs (Less Developed Countries) |
| Economic Contribution | Care sector contribution to GDP | 3%–10% | Global south / developing countries |
| Gender Equality | Gender employment gap reduction | Up to 50% | General LDCs |
| Economic Return | ROI of investing in care sector | \$1 → \$2.5–\$4.5 | Global estimates from ILO, UN Women |
| Poverty Reduction | Female-headed household income improvements | Significant increase | Africa, South Asia |
| Unpaid Care Work Burden | Share of unpaid care by women | Over 75% | Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America |
| Time Use | Average daily unpaid care work (Women vs. Men) | Women: 3–6 hrs / Men: 0.5–2 hrs | South Asia, MENA, Sub-Saharan Africa |
| Childcare Infrastructure | Childcare service coverage rate | Often below 20% | LDCs |
| Aging and Eldercare Gaps | Elder care unmet needs | High unmet needs, low formal services | Southeast Asia, Africa |
| Informality in Care Work | Informal vs. formal care sector distribution | Majority informal | Global South |

Table 1: Computed by the Author

3.1 Impact of the Care Economy in the Western World

| Category | Indicator / Metric | Data / Value | Country / Region |
|--|--|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Economic Contribution | % of GDP from care sectors | 10%–18% | OECD average |
| | Value of unpaid care work | \$470 billion (2017) | United States |
| | | £132 billion (2021) | United Kingdom |
| Employment | % of workforce in care-related jobs | 10%–20% | OECD countries |
| | % of care workers who are women | ~76–80% | UK, Germany, Canada, USA |
| | Number of care jobs | 19 million+ | United States |
| | Vacant care positions | 165,000 | United Kingdom (2023) |
| Wages & Job Quality | Wage gap (care vs national average) | -20% to -40% lower | USA, UK, Germany |
| | % of U.S. care workers in poverty | ~25% | United States |
| | % relying on public assistance | ~40% | United States |
| Gender Equality | Female labor participation (post childcare reform) | +16% +6–8% | Quebec, Canada Germany |
| | Female labor force participation (general) | 77–80% | Norway, Sweden |
| Return on Investment (ROI) | Economic return per \$1 spent on care | Up to \$2.50 | OECD average |
| | Potential GDP increase from gender employment parity | Up to 9% long-term GDP growth | G7 Countries (IMF, 2017) |
| Public Childcare Enrollment (Age 3–5) | Enrollment rate | Over 90% | Nordic countries (e.g., Sweden) |
| Health & Social Benefits | % of GDP spent on health and social care | 11–18% | USA, Germany, UK |
| | Improved early childhood outcomes | Cognitive & educational gains | Canada, Nordic countries |

Table 2: Computed by the Author

4.0 Analysis

The care economy jobs and work related to taking care of children, elderly, and others plays a huge role in both less developed countries (LDCs) and Western nations, but the way it looks and feels is quite different between these places. Investing in care pays off everywhere in developing countries, every \$1 spent on care can generate \$2.5 to \$4.5 in economic returns, which is even higher than the return seen in richer countries about \$2.50 for every \$1 invested (Sachs, Ahluwalia, Amoako, Aninat, Cohen, Diabre, & Fogel, 2001). Plus, care investments help boost incomes, especially for female-headed households in Africa and South Asia, helping reduce poverty. In wealthier countries, closing the gender employment gap could lead to a 9% long-term GDP boost, showing how important care work is for the broader economy. Women and Gender Equality: Women carry the biggest share of unpaid care work everywhere, but it is especially stark in developing regions where women do more than 75% of it often spending 3 to 6 hours a day on care, compared to men's 0.5 to 2 hours.

Investments in care can help close gender employment gaps by as much as half in these countries (Lee & Martínez, 2023). Additionally, in the West, women also make up most care workers (around 76-80%), but better childcare options and reforms have helped increase women's participation in the workforce. For example, Canada and Germany saw female labor participation jump after childcare reforms. Nordic countries go even further, with over 90% of children enrolled in public childcare, supporting gender equality and parents' ability to work. The care sector itself is a major employer of women, with women comprising more than 70% of the global health and social workforce (WHO, 2021). Despite this, in developed countries, women continue to perform a disproportionate share of unpaid care work, particularly in households with children or dependent adults. While some redistribution of responsibilities has occurred, the burden of unpaid domestic

tasks remains largely on women. Public investment in care services such as universal childcare not only creates employment but also enables more women to enter and remain in the labour market.

Challenges and Social Impact: While developing countries struggle with limited childcare access and eldercare services, Western countries spend a good chunk of their GDP (11% to 18%) on health and social care, which leads to better outcomes for kids' education and development. Both developing and Western countries see the care economy as crucial, but Western countries benefit from more investment and stronger social systems. Developing countries have tremendous potential to create jobs and lift people out of poverty but to tap into the benefits of the care economy, they need to build stronger formal care systems and adopt supportive policies. Meanwhile, some developed nations have already recognized the care economy as a powerful driver of economic growth and gender equality. As Kabeer (2021) notes, the experience of developed countries shows that when care work is valued and well-supported, it does far more than support families it helps power entire economies. By investing in quality care services societies are not only meeting the social and demographic needs of their populations they are also building stronger, more resilient, and more sustainable economies for the future. It is a model that developing nations like Nigeria can learn from and adapt to build a more equitable future.

The following are worth noting: Unlike industries such as construction or technology, care work cannot be automated or outsourced, but deeply human requiring time, presence, and compassion. Also, because of this, investments in care create more jobs per dollar spent. It's a sector with a uniquely powerful ripple effect: as it grows, it lifts entire families and communities with it. More than just a social good, the care economy is a strategic engine for growth. It boosts productivity, brings more women into the workforce, and builds the kind of economy that values people not just profit. In a world still

recovering from global crises, this kind of investment is not optional it is essential. At its core, the care economy supports life itself. And when we invest in it, we invest in a future that is more resilient, more inclusive, and more just for everyone. As populations in developed countries grow older, the care economy becomes more than important it becomes a lifeline. As populations in developed countries grow older, the care economy becomes a vital part of how we live and support each other. More elderly people need long-term care, health services, and everyday support, which puts growing pressure on public systems and families especially women, who often take on the role of informal caregivers while juggling so much else (OECD, 2020). But this shift also brings hope and opportunity. Investing in eldercare can ease the heavy burden on families, create meaningful jobs, and inspire new ways to deliver better care.

By expanding and professionalizing the care workforce, we improve the quality of services and, most importantly, honor the dignity and well-being of our aging loved ones. At its core, care is not just a social good, it is a smart forward-looking economic strategy that supports long-term stability and shared prosperity. At the same time, the care economy is transforming the way we think about work. In countries like Sweden, Germany, and Canada, care workers are receiving structured training, fair wages, and clear career paths helping to professionalize a sector that's long been undervalued (ILO, 2018). Technology is also reshaping care, with innovations like telemedicine, assistive devices, and care robotics improving service delivery and creating entirely new kinds of jobs. With the growing demand for care, this long-overlooked work is finally being recognized and supported at an institutional level opening the door to meaningful job opportunities and helping shape a more inclusive, adaptable workforce that meets the needs of our aging and rapidly changing society.

The care economy also offers a path to sustainable, inclusive growth. Care work is inherently low in emissions compared to heavy industry, and most care jobs are local they cannot be offshored or automated away. Care roles help keep people connected to their communities, supporting local economies and building resilience at the regional level. Because of its low environmental impact and high social value, the care economy stands out as a powerful, sustainable engine for growth, one that addresses the needs of today while helping prepare for the challenges of tomorrow. Recent scholarship highlights that investing in the care sector aligns with climate goals by fostering low-carbon employment while addressing social needs (Merrill & Razavi, 2023). Because care services like childcare, eldercare, and health support are delivered right in our communities, they help keep income local and create jobs close to home. They also reduce the need for long commutes or transporting goods over long distances which helps cut down on emissions in everyday life. This kind of local, community-based care not only strengthens neighbourhoods and supports local economies, but it also makes growth more fair and sustainable. In this way, the care economy brings together two powerful goals caring for the planet and caring for people. This shows that we can build an economy that cares for the environment while truly supporting communities. By putting care at the centre of development, we're not just growing the economy we are shaping a future that is sustainable and inclusive and guarantees a path that honours every individual and lays the groundwork for lasting progress across generations.

5. 0 Diagnosis of Care Policies

Building a strong and inclusive care economy begins with recognizing a simple truth: care is the lifeblood of every society. It is the steady, often unnoticed work that keeps families going,

holds communities together, and makes everyday life possible. Though it happens quietly, its impact is powerful and it deserves to be seen, valued, and supported. Yet for far too long, care has been overlooked, undervalued, and unfairly shared often falling disproportionately on women and marginalized groups. In many parts of the world, particularly in countries like Nigeria and across the Global South, care work whether it involves raising children, supporting elderly parents, tending to the sick, or maintaining households is predominantly performed by women. This work is often unpaid, underrecognized, and carried out at significant personal cost (Esquivel, 2021). The care economy is one of the most gendered sectors in the world a mirror reflecting deeply rooted social and economic inequalities. Hidden within the care economy is one of the greatest opportunities for real change. As feminist economists like Kabeer (2021) highlight, when we start to recognize and invest in care work, we challenge old-fashioned gender roles and empower women economically and spark progress throughout society.

Shifting care from something handled quietly in homes to something publicly supported through policy, funding, and social protection can ease the heavy load carried by women, especially in under-resourced communities. It opens the door to more balanced caregiving responsibilities and lays the groundwork for growth that is not just inclusive, but resilient. To truly understand what this transformation means, picture the daily life of a woman in a low-income rural household. She rises before dawn to prepare food, fetch water, and care for her children and elderly parents all before thinking of paid work, if that is even an option. Her unpaid care work keeps her family going, but it limits her opportunities and well-being. Now imagine a world where she has access to affordable, publicly supported care services like childcare and eldercare giving her the freedom to pursue work, education, or rest. That kind of support does not just change her life; it transforms entire communities.

A woman who once had no choice to sacrifice her dreams suddenly has options. She can go back to school or simply take a moment to rest. Her life improves, and so does her family's. Now imagine that same shift happening for millions of women. The impact is nothing short of transformative not just for them, but for entire communities and the economy. Transforming the care economy is not just the right thing to do; it is a smart, strategic move toward gender justice and sustainable development. It is how we build a future that works for everyone. She wakes up at dawn, prepares food, fetches water, tends to her children, and perhaps cares for an aging parent, all before considering whether she can pursue paid work. Millions of women around the world spend their days caring for others doing essential work that keeps families and communities running but their efforts remain invisible in economic policies and GDP figures. As Folbre (2020) points out, this unpaid care work leaves women excluded from formal jobs and social protections. Addressing this injustice is not just a policy exercise but a moral duty. A

strong national care policy is the first step toward correcting decades of neglect. When we treat care as a public good, not just a personal responsibility, we open the door to deep, lasting change that can reshape society for the better. Effective care policies need to fully understand and address the care needs of people of all ages and abilities. They should clearly outline how these needs will be met through ongoing public investment, quality services, and strong coordination between different government departments and levels (Razavi, 2016). Recognising and supporting care work is key to building a fairer society. When care is valued and shared more equally, it lays the groundwork for real gender equality and inclusive economic progress. Everyone benefits when care is treated as a right universal access to care services ensures that no one is left behind. services is essential for achieving true gender equality and social inclusion. Simply encouraging women to join the workforce is not enough if affordable childcare and eldercare remain out of reach (Bahn,

Cohen, & Rodgers, 2020). That is why the state must step in as a central partner investing in public daycare centers, expanding healthcare in underserved communities, training care workers, and making sure eldercare is both accessible and respectful.

True equity means everyone can access care, regardless of wealth or location (ILO, 2018). Since most unpaid care work falls on women, it continues to fuel gender inequality. To create a fairer society, we must both value this hidden work and share it equally. Time to move beyond simply acknowledging this invisible labour and take meaningful steps to share it more fairly across society. Governments can use tools like time-use surveys to see precisely how care duties are split across genders and social groups, which helps create policies that truly target the problem (Folbre, 2018). Flexible work arrangements, paid paternity leave, and shared parental leave are key to challenging the outdated belief that caregiving is solely the role of a woman. These policies create pathways to more balanced, equitable societies (OECD, 2021). Meanwhile, the care workers who support our families and communities get underpaid, overworked, and without job security continue to carry a heavy burden. Despite the essential role they play in people's lives, far too many still lack basic protections and the respect they rightfully deserve (ILO, 2018). By setting fair wages, offering healthcare benefits, and formalizing care jobs, governments can uplift these workers and improve care quality for everyone.

At the same time, unpaid caregivers who care full-time for children with disabilities or elderly relatives should not be forced into poverty because of their responsibilities. Measures like pension credits, caregiver allowances, and specialized healthcare benefits recognize their invaluable contribution and protect them from long-term financial hardship (Razavi & Staab, 2010). None of this can succeed without sustainable funding. Gender-responsive budgeting ensures that government spending reflects the heavier care burden often carried by women,

preventing policies that reinforce inequality. This means examining every budget decision through a gender lens to understand who benefits, who is left behind, and what kind of society we are building (Budlender, 2015). But changing laws and budgets is only part of the solution. Public education and awareness campaigns play a key role in shifting social norms. When boys grow up only seeing women as caregivers, traditional gender roles become deeply ingrained. Campaigns that highlight men as active caregivers and honour the value of care work can help shift cultural norms, making it more natural for everyone to share caregiving roles (Williams, 2010).

Achieving this vision calls for joint effort from governments, civil society, businesses, and communities, who must come together to design and deliver care systems that work for all. Community-based childcare, mobile health units, and digital caregiving platforms exemplify innovative approaches that extend care access where formal systems fall short (Esquivel, 2021). Investing in care is an investment in people, particularly women, who gain time, choice, and opportunity. The care economy creates meaningful jobs in a sector that resists automation and economic ups and downs, while nurturing children, honoring elders, and strengthening families (Kabeer, 2021). When care is seen not as a burden but as a source of well-being, fairness, and lasting growth, we can reshape our economies and societies for the better. Building a care economy means rethinking our social contract moving from hidden, unpaid expectations to shared, valued, and supported responsibilities. With bold, inclusive policies, we can humanize our economies, uplift millions, and build communities where everyone no matter their gender, age, or income has the chance to flourish.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Investing in care is beyond money building trust between people and in our institutions. Supporting care brings communities closer and helps build stronger societies. In other words, care economy means investing in a better future for everyone. As more women and others join the workforce, having affordable, dependable care becomes absolutely essential. It enables parents and caregivers to work, boosting overall participation in the labor market. This does not just mean more tax revenue it also means fewer people relying on unemployment benefits or social assistance (Antonopoulos et al., 2010). Put simply, investing in care pays off. It strengthens our communities and our economy. When care jobs are brought into the formal workforce, they offer stable employment and fair pay. They also ensure that the people doing this essential work have decent working conditions and access to social protections. These kinds of investments help close gender gaps, reduce income inequality, and build healthier public finances.

The care economy is about more than numbers about everyday love and responsibility that hold communities together. From grandmothers and young caregivers to hardworking nurses, care is everywhere and essential to our well-being. Yet, it remains largely overlooked, unpaid, and unfairly distributed. In Nigeria, these challenges hit hardest for women and girls those who already have the fewest resources but carry the heaviest caregiving burdens. The inequalities they face are not separate issues; gender, income, location, and education all overlap and deepen each other's impact. A poor woman in a rural area is far less likely to have access to formal care services, decent wages, or even time for herself. Yet, she is expected to provide care for children, the elderly, and the sick without question or support (Esquivel, 2021). This is where the true power of the care economy shines. Recognizing care work as real, valuable, skilled, and essential changes the way society shares both its challenges and its rewards. By investing in care infrastructure, training more

professionals, raising wages and protections, and making services accessible to families, we do not just shift resources we create life-changing opportunities for countless people. Such investments allow girls to stay in school, women to pursue careers without sacrificing their families' well-being, and everyone, regardless of income or location, to access quality care when needed (Kabeer, 2021).

Policies such as parental leave and flexible work are not just perks, they transform family life. By challenging the idea that care is only for women they encourage fathers to share in caregiving and be more involved in their children's lives. When men are encouraged and supported to take part in caregiving, it lightens the burden on women and creates a more balanced, loving partnership at home. These policies don't just change schedules, they change mindsets, helping families build stronger bonds and giving everyone a fair shot at both work and family life. When both parents can balance work and care, women gain the freedom to pursue their careers without feeling they must choose between family and opportunity.

Care is not a luxury; it is a lifeline. According to Folbre (2018), when care is fairly supported and shared, its positive effects spread throughout society strengthening families, improving community health, and boosting economic resilience. Most importantly, those who have quietly shouldered the burden of care are finally recognized, valued, and empowered. To truly humanize the care economy is to acknowledge and honour this vital work. to make justice tangible and accessible. It means understanding that caring for others is not a private burden borne alone but a shared social responsibility. When we honor this truth and build systems that reflect it, we do more than reduce inequality we create the conditions for dignity, inclusion, and hope for all.

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