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POLICY PAPER

FROM PARENTHOOD LEAVE TO CHILDCARE SERVICES

BUILDING CARE SYSTEMS THAT WORK FOR WOMEN,
FAMILIES AND ECONOMIES



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FAMILIES AND ECONOMIES

UN Women and The World Bank,
New York and Washington, D.C., October 2026

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The World Bank Group's *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) is a global benchmarking project measuring how laws, regulations, and policies shape women's economic opportunities and private sector development across 190 economies. WBL data and analysis guide countries in identifying opportunities for reforms that unlock women's economic potential and drive job creation and economic growth. WBL recognizes that when women move forward, entire economies move forward.



UN Women exists to advance women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

As the lead United Nations entity on gender equality and secretariat of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, we shift laws, institutions, social norms and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. Our partnerships with governments, women's movements and the private sector, coupled with our coordination of the broader United Nations, deliver lasting changes. We make strides in four areas: leadership, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and peace, security and humanitarian action.

UN Women keeps the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.

SUMMARY

Rising care needs, persistent gender inequalities and growing labour market pressures make investing in the care economy¹ an urgent policy priority. Drawing on evidence from the World Bank Group's *Women, Business and the Law 2026* report,² this joint UN Women–The World Bank policy brief examines the state of parenthood policies³ and childcare services across 190 economies. It shows that although many countries have strengthened legal frameworks for parenthood policies and childcare services, progress remains uneven and substantial implementation gaps persist. It further shows that limited access to affordable and quality childcare alongside inadequate support for fathers' caregiving, weak supportive legal frameworks and insufficient enforcement continue to constrain women's labour market participation and reinforce unequal caregiving. Findings underscore that strengthening parenthood policies and childcare services as an integrated continuum of care can help reduce gender gaps, support families, create decent jobs and generate significant economic returns, with benefits for all of society. The brief provides examples of good practice and identifies recommendations to improve the design, financing, implementation and enforcement of parenthood policies and expand access to affordable, quality childcare services.

KEY ISSUES

INVESTING IN THE CARE ECONOMY IS AN URGENT POLICY PRIORITY

Care work is the building block for well-being and economic prosperity. Everyone requires care throughout their lifetime and on a daily basis to function and participate in society. Without the daily unpaid and paid labour of caring for children, sick, disabled or older family and community members, our economies would grind to a halt.

Yet unpaid and paid care work are highly gendered and unequal. Around the world, women and girls spend more than 2.5 times as many hours a day as men on unpaid care work.⁴ At the same time, women make up two thirds of the paid care workforce,⁵ undertaking essential roles in healthcare, early childhood education, long-term care and paid domestic work sectors that are frequently low-paid and insecure.⁶

The demand for care work is rising. Rapid demographic shifts and increasing chronic health conditions among other factors, mean that by 2030, an estimated 2.3 billion people worldwide will require care.⁷ Almost 593 million children below primary school entry age need some form of childcare, and 349 million of these children currently do not have access to it.⁸ These unmet childcare needs are part of a broader global care challenge that is set to intensify as populations age: the number of people aged 65 and older is projected to double by 2050, with low- and middle-income countries expected to face the greatest challenges in meeting these care demands.⁹

The opportunity costs are significant. Globally, 45 per cent of working-age women are outside the labour market due to unpaid care work responsibilities, compared to just 5 per cent of men,¹⁰ while the labour market participation of women aged 25–54 with at least one child aged under 6 drops to 53 per cent, compared to 95 per cent for men.¹¹ Unequal care responsibilities are also a key driver of the persistent global gender wage and pension gaps¹² that underpin women's higher risk of lifetime poverty.¹³ Growing numbers of men want to be more involved in caregiving, but inadequate care leave policies and restrictive social norms discourage them from doing so.¹⁴

Parenthood leave provisions and childcare services form a policy continuum that reduces key gender gaps. Paid maternity, paternity and parental leave are important for supporting women's return to paid work and promoting more equal caregiving between women and men; while childcare services, especially for children under age three, are critical for sustaining women's employment in quality jobs. As this brief demonstrates, both are linked to higher female labour market participation, reduced gender gaps, and broad economic and social gains.

BOX 1**INVESTING IN THE CARE ECONOMY IS A CATALYST FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT, HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, WELL-BEING AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY**

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that investing in care policies (including parenthood leave) and care services (including childcare) yields powerful, measurable returns for gender equality, the economy and social well-being.¹⁵ The data below underscore why investing in the care economy is both a high-impact economic strategy and a social priority.

- **Human capabilities:** In some low-income country contexts, children who attend early childhood care and education programmes stay in school an average of one year longer and are more likely to access higher-skilled employment as adults.¹⁶
- **Decent job creation:** Nearly 300 million new decent jobs could be created by 2035 by investing in care services and policies, with the majority of those jobs benefiting women.¹⁷
- **Return on investment:** Each dollar spent on the care sector has the potential to generate two to three times more jobs than if the same dollar were spent on sectors such as physical infrastructure and construction, with some of the investment recouped through increased tax.¹⁸
- **Decreased gender gaps in labour market participation:** In certain contexts, expanded childcare infrastructure could reduce gender employment gaps by 5 per cent, with 70–92 per cent of the jobs created in early childhood care and education potentially benefiting women.¹⁹
- **Increased Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and poverty alleviation:** Every \$1 invested in closing childcare policy gaps could yield \$3.76 in global GDP by 2035, while boosting women's employment rate by more than 10 percentage points.²⁰
- **Care jobs are green jobs:** An average care sector job can produce 26 times less greenhouse gas than a manufacturing job, making care sector investments potentially both economically and environmentally sustainable.²¹

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTHOOD POLICIES

KEY ISSUES

Choices around starting a family often shape the professional paths women take and the employment opportunities available to them. Evidence shows that the birth of a child triggers a sharp and lasting decline in women's earnings, whereas men's income trajectories remain largely unchanged.²² Mandated paid parenthood leave policies can support women's return to work after childbirth²³ and are positively associated with female employment.²⁴ When governments administer maternity benefits through compulsory social insurance schemes or public funds, employers are less likely to discriminate against women of childbearing age than when employers bear the cost directly.²⁵ Lastly, employment protection for women during pregnancy and after childbirth reduces the risk of their jobs being unfairly terminated because of their biological capacity to bear children.²⁶

The design of paternity leave is important. Fathers' uptake of leave is associated with increased earnings for mothers, reduced maternal absenteeism due to illness, and higher female employment in private firms.²⁷ A narrower gap between maternal and paternal leave duration is linked to higher female labour force participation rates.²⁸

Legislation alone cannot redistribute care work without active policy support. Measuring supportive frameworks—including leave application processes,

paternity leave incentives, sex-disaggregated time-use data and government-led care-sharing initiatives—is as important as measuring the laws themselves, since the gap between legal entitlement and lived experience is where women's economic inclusion is most often lost.

Legal protections on their own are insufficient without the enabling conditions that determine whether those protections are used. Complex application procedures reduce enrolment in social programmes more broadly;²⁹ streamlining paperwork requirements aligned with paid leave programmes can meaningfully improve uptake.³⁰ Paternity leave faces a parallel implementation gap: despite existing legislation, uptake rates remain low worldwide,³¹ driven by workplace practices, social norms, gender stereotypes and economic constraints that deter fathers from taking leave to which they are legally entitled.³²

A key policy challenge is ensuring that there is adequate coverage for workers outside standard employment relationships. In many countries, self-employed, temporary, part-time and informal workers remain excluded from parenthood leave entitlements and related benefits, highlighting the importance of inclusive financing and delivery mechanisms that extend protection beyond traditional employment arrangements.

BOX 2**TYPES OF PARENTHOOD LEAVE****Maternity leave:**

Reserved exclusively for the female biological mother, it focuses on physical recovery from childbirth, infant health, and breastfeeding. The International Labour Organization (ILO) standard sets a minimum of 14 weeks, recommended up to 18 weeks, with guaranteed cash benefits provided through social insurance or public funds.

Paternity leave:

Leave granted to fathers or second parents around the time of birth. It encourages early bonding and family support.

Parental leave:

Longer, individual or shared entitlement available to either parent. It usually follows maternity or paternity leave and can be used flexibly during a child's early years.

Note: In this report, 'parenthood leave' is used as an umbrella term covering all three types of leave.

GLOBAL TRENDS IN PARENTHOOD: WHAT THE DATA SHOW

The *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) Parenthood topic measures laws and policies supporting women's work during and after pregnancy, and the extent to which those laws are enforced in practice, across three pillars:

- 1. Legal frameworks** assess whether paid leave is available to mothers and fathers, whether maternity benefits are publicly administered, and whether dismissal of pregnant workers is prohibited.
- 2. Supportive frameworks** assess whether maternity benefits can be accessed through a single government application process, whether incentives exist to encourage fathers to take leave, whether governments publish anonymized sex-disaggregated data on unpaid care work, and whether governments have programmes to support a more equal sharing of care responsibilities.
- 3. Enforcement perceptions** showcase experts' assessments of how effectively public authorities enforce existing laws.

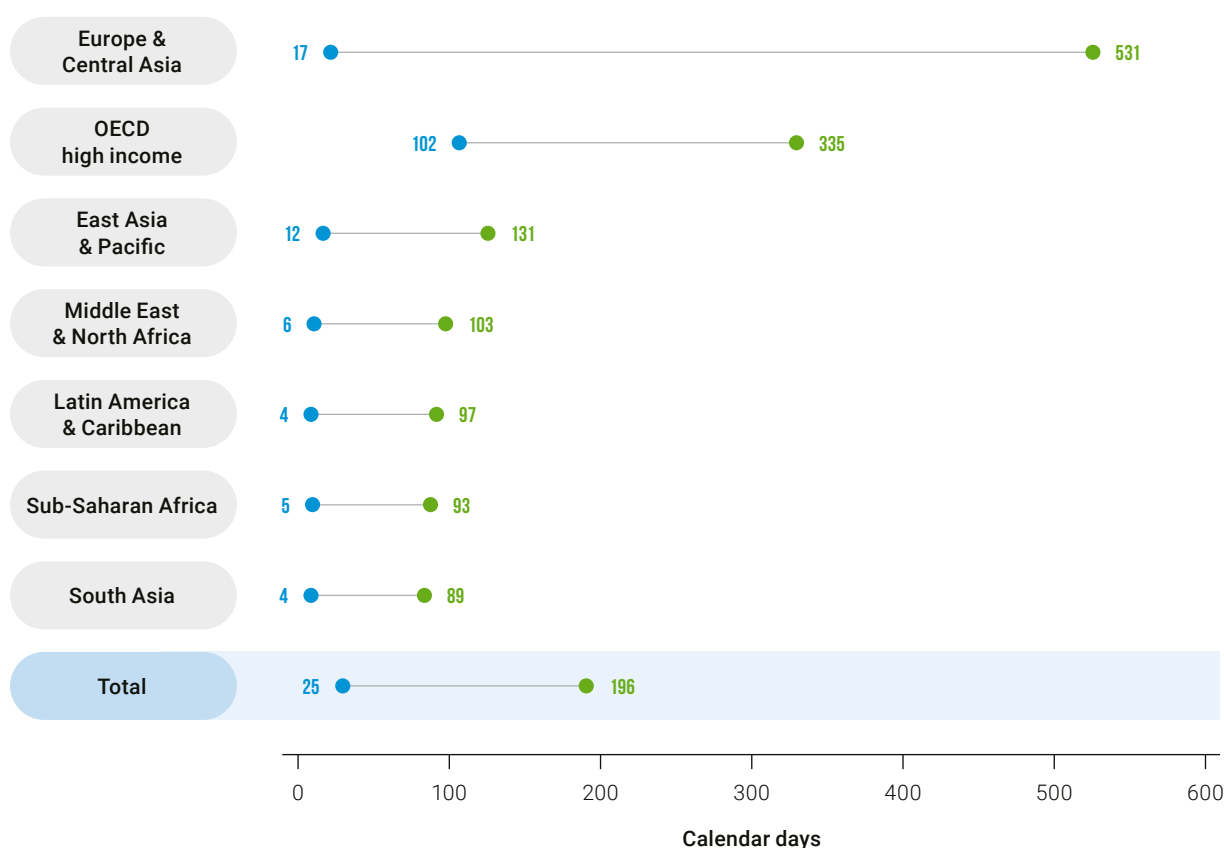
KEY FINDINGS: PARENTHOOD

Across 190 economies, the *Women, Business and the Law 2026* report reveals the following:

Support for mothers	Support for fathers
123 economies meet the ILO standard of providing at least 14 weeks' paid leave for mothers, either through maternity leave, parental leave, or a combination of both.	124 economies formally grant fathers paid leave , yet half of those economies offer less than 2 weeks, with entitlements ranging from a single day ³⁶ to 10 calendar days. ³⁷
61 economies remain below this threshold , offering mothers paid leave ranging from 14 calendar days ³³ to 91 calendar days, ³⁴ while 6 ³⁵ provide no paid maternity leave at all.	In 66 economies, fathers have no legal entitlement to paid leave , underscoring how far most of the world still is from treating parental responsibility as a genuinely shared one.
The financing of these benefits varies considerably: governments bear the full cost in 100 economies, share the responsibility with employers in 41, and leave it entirely to employers in the remaining 43.	

FIGURE 1

Average duration of paid leave available to fathers and mothers, by region, in calendar days



Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2026*.

● Fathers ● Mothers

THE PARENTHOOD GAP

- The gap between the duration of leave for mothers and fathers stands out as the most telling structural imbalance in parenthood legislation worldwide.
- **On average, mothers are entitled to nearly eight times the paid leave of fathers:** 196 calendar days for mothers vs 25 days for fathers (see Figure 1).
- **Only four economies have moved towards parity for parenthood leave available to mothers and fathers.**³⁸

ECONOMIES CONTINUE TO FALL SHORT ON SUPPORTIVE PARENTHOOD FRAMEWORKS:

- **38** provide incentives for fathers to take leave to which they are entitled.
- **57** have government-led initiatives promoting the equal sharing of unpaid care work – leaving most of the responsibility on women by default.
- Only **50** publish anonymized, sex-disaggregated data on unpaid care work, despite such data being essential for designing family and employment policies that work equitably for men and women.

PERCEPTIONS OF ENFORCEMENT ARE MODERATE, BUT VARY ACROSS REGIONS:

- On average, parenthood-related laws are perceived as enforced only slightly above a moderate level (56 per cent).
- Experts perceive enforcement as strongest in OECD high-income economies and in Europe and Central Asia. South Asia and East Asia and the Pacific trail far behind.

MOMENTUM IS GROWING ON PARENTHOOD LAW REFORMS:

- **13 economies enacted 16 positive reforms in parenthood laws** between 2023 and 2025. Though they span a range of income levels, the majority are from sub-Saharan Africa, signalling growing momentum in a region that has historically lagged on parenthood protections.
- **Paid maternity leave:** Egypt, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Saudi Arabia increased the duration of paid maternity leave; Egypt now meets the ILO Convention 183 standard of at least 14 weeks.
- **Paid paternity leave:** Egypt, Madagascar and Somalia introduced paid paternity leave for the first time, while Korea, Mauritius, Mozambique and Uruguay extended its duration.
- **Financing:** Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia and South Sudan moved to ensure government responsibility for financing paid maternity leave.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDCARE SERVICES

KEY ISSUES

Childcare services are a critical bridge between parenthood leave provisions and sustained labour market engagement. Limited access to affordable, quality childcare—especially for children under age three—remains a critical and largely under-addressed barrier to women’s labour market participation. In many contexts, families rely on fragmented and informal arrangements, constraining mothers’ ability to enter, remain in or progress in the labour market and quality jobs.

Evidence shows that expanding access to childcare delivers substantial economic and social returns. Impact evaluations from low- and middle-income countries find that affordable childcare increases women’s labour force participation, challenges restrictive gender norms and creates jobs in the care sector.³⁹

Yet access to affordable and quality childcare services remains out of reach for families world-wide. Only a minority of parents live in countries with statutory childcare provisions, and even fewer can access services immediately following parenthood leave.⁴⁰ Childcare services enable mothers to maintain earnings and re-enter the workforce, particularly where leave benefits or social assistance are insufficient.⁴¹ Evidence further shows that strengthening childcare legislation improves access and can increase women’s labour market participation over time.⁴² Finally, investments in early childhood care and education are essential for developing human capabilities.⁴³

GLOBAL TRENDS IN CHILDCARE: WHAT THE DATA SHOW

The WBL Childcare topic data benchmarks laws governing the provision of formal centre-based childcare services for children below age three,⁴⁴

policy instruments that support their effective implementation, and the extent to which they are enforced.⁴⁵

Progress is evaluated across the three WBL pillars:

- 1. Legal frameworks** assess availability, public finance and quality of centre-based childcare services.
- 2. Supportive frameworks** assess whether there are publicly available registries of childcare providers, procedures for financial support for both parents and nonstate childcare providers are clearly outlined, and the government publishes benchmarking quality reports.
- 3. Enforcement perceptions** show care experts’ assessments of how effectively public authorities enforce existing laws.⁴⁶

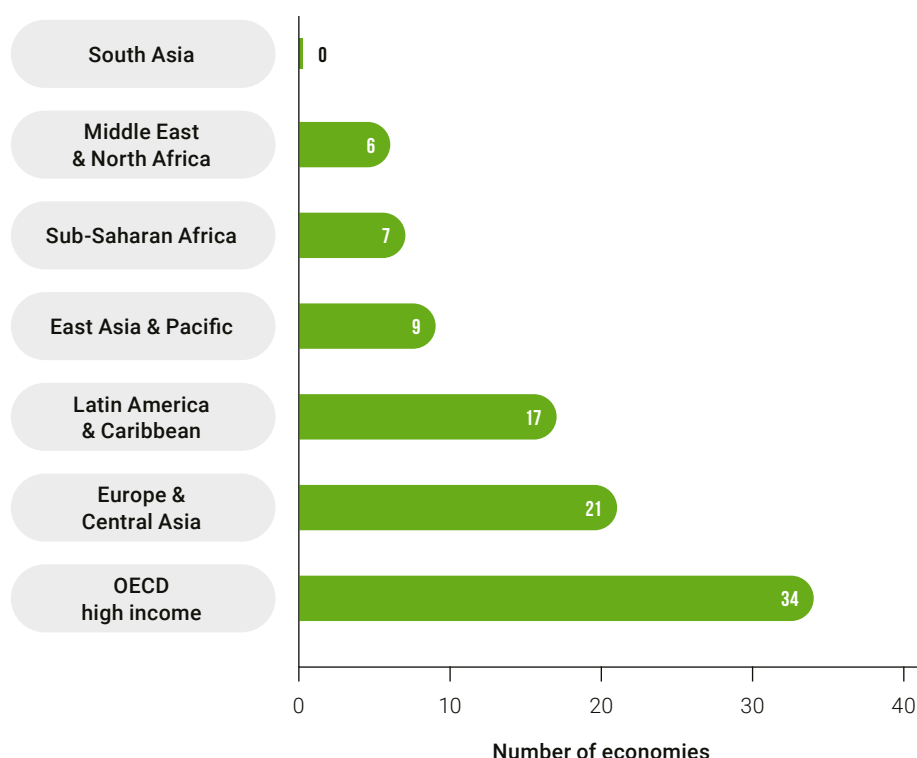
KEY FINDINGS: CHILDCARE SERVICES

Across 190 economies, the *Women, Business and the Law 2026* report reveals the following:

- **146** have laws regulating provision of formal centre-based childcare services, either through government (86), private centres (145), or employers unconditional on the presence of female employees (13).
- **94** have laws establishing some form of financial or tax support for families or nonstate childcare providers (59 economies provide support for both families and providers). These mechanisms are mostly concentrated in OECD high-income countries, followed by Europe and Central Asia, while their near absence in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa points to a critical policy gap (Figure 2).
- **66** establish selected standards and quality assurance measures, including structural quality elements such as child-to-caregiver ratios or maximum group sizes, workforce requirements, and regular inspections or reporting mechanisms.
- **44** do not have any legal frameworks regulating provision of childcare services for children under age three.

FIGURE 2

Economies with some form of public finance support (financial or tax) for families or nonstate providers, by region



Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2026*.

Economies continue to fall short on supportive frameworks:

- **91** maintain a publicly available registry or database of childcare providers to allow families to access information to evaluate childcare options.
- **67** establish clear application procedures for families to access financial support for childcare services.
- **49** have clear application procedures for nonstate providers of childcare services to access financial support.
- **30** publish government reports assessing quality of childcare services, but only 17 publish these assessments at the individual provider level.

Perceptions of enforcement are above moderate, but vary across regions:

- On average, childcare-related laws are perceived as enforced slightly above a moderate level (53 per cent).
- Experts perceive enforcement to be strongest in high-income economies, while low-income economies lag considerably.

Policymakers are placing increasing emphasis on childcare reform:

- **11 economies enacted 13 positive reforms in childcare laws** between 2023 and 2025. While reforms were enacted across economies at all income levels, most originated in sub-Saharan Africa, signalling growing momentum in a region that has historically lagged in establishing childcare policy frameworks.
- **Provision of childcare services:** Senegal and Togo introduced legislation governing provision of centre-based childcare services.
- **Public finance:** Greece enacted legislation establishing financial support for private childcare centres, while Peru established financial support for families.
- **Quality:** Angola, Bahrain, Costa Rica, Denmark, Lao PDR, Qatar, Senegal, Spain and Togo also enhanced legal frameworks around quality standards.

BEST PRACTICES FOR POLICY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION: PARENTHOOD LEAVE PROVISIONS

International experience highlights that the overall effectiveness of parenthood leave policies depends not only on their design, but also on how they are implemented in practice. Eligibility rules, leave duration, income replacement, employment protection, adequate financing arrangements, administrative processes and awareness of entitlements all help ensure that leave benefits are accessible to, and used by, all eligible parents.

The following section highlights key policy design and implementation features that can strengthen the uptake and outcomes of parenthood leave schemes and promote more equitable sharing of caregiving responsibilities. These features are based on evidence and best practice across a range of contexts and build on the dimensions outlined in the 2026 WBL report.

KEY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION FEATURES

I. TYPE

Many countries are moving towards establishing gender-neutral parental leave that applies to any caregiver and provides longer periods of leave for either parent to care for their child, beyond maternity and paternity leave.⁴⁷ Parental leave schemes can help to reduce workplace biases, encourage shared caregiving responsibilities and expand entitlements to cover diverse family arrangements, including adoptive, foster and same-sex parents.⁴⁸

186 countries, although only 49 provided some form of paid parental leave.⁴⁹ Evidence shows that access remains uneven: among countries with parental leave provisions, 56 extend entitlements to adoptive parents, while only 25 provide access to same-sex parents.⁵⁰ Coverage gaps are also significant for workers in informal employment, who are often excluded from contributory social protection and employment-based leave entitlements.⁵¹ Parenthood leave schemes should also extend coverage to self-employed workers and workers in informal employment. Achieving broad coverage requires implementation mechanisms that extend leave benefits beyond formal employment, including financing and administrative arrangements that reach self-employed, informal and other non-standard workers.

II. AVAILABILITY AND COVERAGE

Expanding the availability and coverage of paid parenthood leave schemes is important to ensure such schemes are inclusive and respond to the realities of diverse families. A significant gap is observed in relation to paid parental leave. In 2024, statutory parental leave was available in 69 out of

III. EQUITABLE LEAVE DURATION

Adequate and equitable leave duration between parents is a key determinant of whether parenthood leave provisions contribute to gender equality, child well-being and positive labour market outcomes. Leave entitlements should provide sufficient time for both birthing and non-birthing partners to support postnatal recovery, infant health and development, parent–child bonding and parents’ continued attachment to employment.⁵² When leave periods are too short they can undermine the well-being of parents and children and limit opportunities to redistribute caregiving responsibilities,⁵³ while very long, poorly paid and transferable leave can weaken women’s labour market outcomes, pay progression and access to leadership positions.⁵⁴ More equitable leave duration for both parents is also important to encourage men’s caregiving and support fairer sharing of care responsibilities.⁵⁵

IV. PAYMENT LEVEL AND INCOME REPLACEMENT

Adequate payment and income replacement is critical to ensuring the effective uptake of parenthood leave entitlements across genders, with particular importance for paternity and parental leave. Low-paid or unpaid leave can create financial barriers that prevent parents—particularly fathers and low-income household—from taking their full leave entitlements, thereby reinforcing gender inequalities in caregiving⁵⁶ and employment. For instance, in many countries where parental leave benefits are available, they are provided either as a flat-rate payment or through a combination of flat-rate and earnings-related components. Decisions about whether to take parental leave are often shaped by expected income losses and prevailing gender pay gaps in the labour market, which can discourage men from taking this leave when the financial trade-offs are greater relative to those when women take leave.⁵⁷ To support effective uptake by both parents, parenthood leave benefits should provide adequate

income security, ideally through full wage replacement. Timely and predictable benefit payments are also critical to effective implementation, as delays or administrative barriers can discourage eligible parents from using available leave entitlements.

V. INCENTIVES TO INCREASE UPTAKE

Non-transferable entitlements and well-designed incentives for fathers are critical to increasing men’s full uptake of paternity and parental leave entitlements. Gender-neutral leave can expand formal access to leave entitlements, but when paid parental leave is allocated to the household rather than to each parent individually, it is less likely to shift unequal patterns of leave-taking.⁵⁸ Non-transferable entitlements and other incentives for fathers—such as ‘use it or lose it’ quotas and bonus periods when both parents take leave—are more effective in increasing men’s uptake and supporting a more equal distribution of caregiving.⁵⁹ When parental leave is available only as a shared family entitlement it is more likely to be taken mainly by mothers, especially where income replacement is low.

Incentives for fathers to take their full paternity or parental leave entitlements include guaranteed job protection, enhanced income replacement, bonus parental leave entitlements, and compulsory or flexible paternity leave. Initiatives that directly address discriminatory social norms related to caregiving, including in the workplace, are also essential, as fathers’ uptake of parental leave is shaped not only by legal entitlements but also by socially prescribed expectations around caregiving and masculinity. Information campaigns, employer engagement and effective enforcement of job-protection provisions can further support uptake by ensuring that parents are not only aware of their entitlements but can exercise them without fear of discrimination or career penalties.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN POLICY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION: PARENTHOOD LEAVE PROVISIONS

■ COLOMBIA

Colombia combines maternity, paternity and shared parental leave into a flexible system. Mothers are entitled to 18 weeks of leave, with the first 12 weeks reserved exclusively for them and the remaining 6 weeks available to be shared between parents by mutual agreement. Fathers are also guaranteed 2 weeks of non-transferable paid paternity leave. All leave is compensated at 100 per cent of previous earnings and fully financed by the government. Colombia is among the few countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that recognize paid parental leave, making its shared-leave framework a relevant regional example.

■ MAURITIUS

Mauritius combines relatively long maternity and paternity leave entitlements with full wage replacement. Mothers are entitled to 112 calendar days of paid maternity leave, while fathers have an individual entitlement to 28 calendar days of paid paternity leave following a reform in 2024. These durations place Mauritius among the leading economies in sub-Saharan Africa, with the longest paternity leave entitlement in the region and one of the longest maternity leave entitlements, exceeded only by The Gambia (180 days), South Africa (120 days) and Ethiopia (120 days). Both leaves are compensated at 100 per cent of previous earnings; however, unlike systems financed through social insurance or public funds, Mauritius places the full financial responsibility for leave payments on employers.

■ NORWAY

In Norway, the government provides paid parental leave for birth and adoptive parents, including same-sex partners, with reserved quotas for each parent and a shared period.⁶⁰ Parents can choose between 49 weeks at full pay or 61 weeks and 1 day at 80 per cent coverage. The father's quota ('use it or lose it') of 15 weeks at full pay has helped increase men's use of parental leave: in 2022, 90 per cent of fathers took parental leave, and 70 per cent took it for exactly the length of the quota.⁶¹

■ THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

The Republic of Korea provides individual, non-transferable entitlements that can be combined with financial incentives. Each parent has an individual entitlement to up to 12 months of parental leave,⁶² with recent reforms extending the entitlement to up to 18 months in specific cases.⁶³ The system also encourages more equal caregiving by increasing replacement rates when both parents use parental leave.⁶⁴

BEST PRACTICES FOR POLICY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION: CHILDCARE SERVICES

International experience highlights a set of policy design considerations that are critical to ensure the effectiveness of childcare services for children, parents/guardians and childcare workers.⁶⁵

Such measures include ensuring that services are available, accessible, affordable, adequate and of quality. Effective childcare provision requires that services are not only formally available in terms of quantity and type, but also reachable and usable without discrimination or barriers, geographically and physically accessible, affordable, compatible with working schedules, inclusive, safe and of adequate quality.

Expanding childcare at scale depends not only on service design but also on the enabling systems that support implementation. These include policies

that promote diverse forms of childcare provision to expand access, financing arrangements that make services affordable while prioritizing vulnerable families, and governance structures that establish clear institutional roles and coordination across sectors. Successful implementation also requires mechanisms to strengthen the supply of childcare services and workers, alongside quality assurance systems that ensure children are cared for in safe and stimulating environments. Robust data and monitoring systems are equally important for tracking coverage, quality, utilization and equity, and for supporting evidence-based policymaking over time.

The following section outlines the key features of childcare services, drawing on international evidence and best practice and building on the WBL 2026 report.

KEY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION FEATURES

I. AVAILABILITY AND AFFORDABILITY

As highlighted by the WBL findings, many economies still lack legal provisions regulating childcare services for children under age three, while financial support for families and providers remains limited. Childcare services must be available in sufficient quantity and type⁶⁶ to meet the care needs of children and caregivers, including coverage for children under age three⁶⁷ and enough places to respond to demand. Ensuring childcare is available by the time parenthood leave ends helps create a seamless transition between leave and employment. This continuum between care policies and services helps parents return to paid work without interruptions in care arrangements.⁶⁸

Yet availability alone is not sufficient: services must also be affordable, so that direct and indirect costs do not prevent parents from using them. Given that fewer than half of the economies assessed by the WBL report provide financial or tax support for families, affordability remains a major barrier to childcare access in many contexts. Expanding access therefore requires a mix of financing approaches. Governments can support affordability through demand-side measures, such as childcare subsidies, vouchers, tax benefits or fee assistance for families, as well as supply-side measures, including public funding for providers, operational grants, infrastructure investments, and fee regulations or caps that help lower the cost of services for households.

In many contexts, supply-side support may also be needed to stimulate the expansion of childcare services where providers face financial or market barriers to entry. Well-designed public financing can reduce financial pressure on families, support women's participation in paid work, and help address inequalities in access to childcare.⁶⁹

II. ACCESSIBILITY AND LOCATION

The geographic accessibility of childcare services – including their proximity to homes, workplaces and transport routes – plays a critical role in shaping women's labour market participation, employment continuity, time poverty and broader gender equality outcomes.⁷⁰ This is closely linked to gendered mobility patterns: women's travel is often shaped by caregiving responsibilities, including childcare-related journeys and the need to combine multiple care- and employment-related trips.⁷¹ Accessible childcare services can reduce women's care-related time poverty while supporting their participation in paid work.

The quality of related infrastructure also matters. Safe and reliable transportation, good road conditions, walkability, lighting and safe mobility environments are essential to ensuring equitable access to childcare services.⁷² Expanding accessibility at scale requires coordinated planning across childcare, transport and urban development sectors, as well as investments in infrastructure and service delivery models that can reach diverse populations and underserved communities. Accessibility should also be understood in inclusive terms: childcare services must be reachable and usable without discrimination or barriers. This requires childcare facilities, surrounding infrastructure and related services to be accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities, both as caregivers and as care recipients. Data and monitoring systems can further help identify geographic gaps in coverage and inform decisions about where new services are most needed.

III. HOURS OF OPERATION

The hours and scheduling of childcare services also substantially influence women's labour market participation.⁷³ Extended and flexible childcare hours increase women's ability to engage in full-time employment, rather than being pushed into part-time or precarious work arrangements to accommodate care responsibilities.⁷⁴ Standard childcare schedules often fail to meet the needs of many workers, including shift workers, informal workers⁷⁵ and those employed in the health and service sectors – the majority of whom are women.⁷⁶ Effective implementation requires childcare providers to align operating hours with the needs of working families, including those in shift-based and non-standard employment, and to regularly assess demand to ensure services remain responsive.

IV. QUALITY

Childcare services are of quality when they respond to the needs of children, their caregivers and childcare workers. While childcare settings vary, a few core elements underpin quality across contexts. Quality childcare encompasses both structural and process dimensions and supports children's development through nurturing care: good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning.⁷⁷ Structural quality refers to the characteristics of the childcare environment, including infrastructure, safety, caregiver-to-child ratios, and care workers' qualifications, remuneration and working conditions. Process quality relates to children's daily experiences, including responsive interactions with caregivers, age-appropriate play-based learning, and engagement with families. Together, these dimensions help create safe, stimulating and nurturing environments that foster children's development and well-being, support families and provide decent jobs for care workers.

Many aspects of quality can be supported through laws, regulations and quality assurance systems.

Among the structural dimensions of childcare quality, adequate caregiver-to-child ratios are essential to ensure child safety, well-being and individualized attention. Early childhood learning and development depend on children receiving sufficient responsive interaction from caregivers, making adequate staffing a core quality requirement. Chronic understaffing undermines both care quality and working conditions within the sector.⁷⁸

Safe, healthy and stimulating environments are another important component of structural quality. Caregivers' trust in childcare services depends on facilities providing secure, healthy and protective environments that prevent physical and psychological harm and support children's well-being.⁷⁹

A trained, supported and adequately compensated workforce is also fundamental to quality childcare provision. Childcare workers should have access to fair pay, social protection, labour rights, training and professional development, and safe and decent working conditions. Ensuring decent work in the childcare sector is critical to professionalizing care work, reducing labour shortages and staff turnover, improving service quality and addressing the

persistent undervaluation of care sector jobs.⁸⁰ Care workers should also receive appropriate training and certification to provide inclusive, quality services for children with disabilities as well as children with additional medical, developmental and educational care or support needs. Professionalization efforts should be paired with accessible training pathways and, where needed, introduced gradually where workforce shortages are severe.

The quality of childcare services also depends on effective quality assurance and governance systems. Clear and measurable standards, including regulatory benchmarks for caregiver qualifications, group size, health and safety, and service provision, help establish expectations for quality across providers. Monitoring, inspections and other quality assurance mechanisms can support compliance, identify areas for improvement and strengthen service quality over time.

Transparency and information systems also play an important but often underdeveloped role. Publicly accessible information on service quality, inspection results and performance indicators can strengthen accountability and support informed parental choice. Yet such mechanisms remain unevenly developed across economies, limiting their potential contribution to quality improvement and system oversight.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN POLICY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION: CHILDCARE SERVICES

While no childcare system is without limitations or is a fully transferable model, good practice from different country contexts shows how childcare policy design can shape service availability, affordability and quality, while supporting women's employment, children's development and a more equal distribution of caregiving. For example:

■ FINLAND

Finland provides universal, publicly subsidized childcare as a statutory right for all children under school age, available immediately after the end of parental leave.⁸¹ The Finnish model also includes flexible childcare provision, with services during non-standard hours to support parents with diverse working schedules.⁸²

■ JORDAN

Jordan has established a comprehensive framework for the provision of and access to nonstate childcare services, combining employer-provided childcare, childcare allowances for mothers linked to wage thresholds, operational cost support for nurseries and robust quality assurance mechanisms, including provider reporting requirements and sanctions for noncompliance with quality standards.

■ MAURITIUS

Mauritius stands out as a regional leader in childcare policy, with one of the most comprehensive regulatory frameworks in sub-Saharan Africa governing childcare services for children under age three. The country has established legal provisions for both public and nonstate childcare providers, and is among the first in the region to require employers with more than 250 employees to provide free childcare facilities for workers' children. The framework is supported by financial incentives for both families and providers, including childcare allowances and grants for centre upgrades. Strong quality standards covering infrastructure, workforce qualifications, and oversight help ensure the provision of quality childcare services.

■ QUEBEC, CANADA

Quebec, Canada, offers government-subsidized affordable childcare spaces for children aged under five, through non-profit early childhood centres, subsidized private daycares and regulated home-based childcare providers. Evidence links the reform, introduced in 1997, to increased childcare use, higher maternal labour market participation, longer working weeks and increased women's employment.⁸³

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations aim to support governments in closing the gap between formal legal protections for parenthood leave provisions and childcare services, and their effective translation into gender equality and improved labour market outcomes.

- 1. Design parenthood leave and childcare services as an integrated continuum of care:** Ensure families have access to affordable, quality childcare when parenthood leave ends, helping to avoid gaps in care and to support parents' return to paid work.
- 2. Expand and strengthen paid parenthood leave entitlements for all workers:** Close the parenthood gap (the gap between the duration of leave for mothers and fathers) by ensuring that all new parents have access to adequately paid leave, with paid maternity leave meeting at least ILO standards, and dedicated, non-transferable paid leave for fathers to promote equal caregiving responsibilities and women's continued labour market participation. Extend eligibility rules to self-employed and informally employed workers, adoptive parents and same-sex parents.
- 3. Shift the financing of parenthood leave from employers to public or social insurance systems:** Finance maternity, paternity and parental leave through government-administered social insurance or public funds, using gender-responsive budgeting approaches to guide allocation, to reduce the risk of discrimination against women of childbearing age and improve equitable access to benefits for all workers regardless of employment type.
- 4. Invest in supportive measures that increase uptake of parenthood leave entitlements, especially among fathers:** Simplify application procedures; introduce evidence-based incentives for fathers to take their full leave entitlement; collect and publish sex-disaggregated data on unpaid care work, including through household time-use surveys, to track changes in caregiving responsibilities; and implement public campaigns to support social norms change.
- 5. Expand affordable, quality childcare services with appropriate levels of public support, especially for children under age three:** Establish or strengthen legal frameworks that guarantee the provision of childcare services, and expand access through a mix of public financing and delivery models suited to national contexts. This may include: support directed to families, providers, or both; public and nonstate service provision; and targeted support that improves affordability for vulnerable households while expanding coverage and supporting service quality. Efforts should also ensure that families can access affordable, quality care when it is needed, including in rural and underserved areas, for children with disabilities or additional care needs, and through extended and flexible hours that meet the needs of shift and informal sector workers.

- 6. Strengthen childcare quality and working conditions:** Adopt and enforce comprehensive standards that support both structural and process dimensions of childcare quality, including safe and stimulating environments, appropriate caregiver-to-child ratios, qualified and supported caregivers, responsive caregiving and effective quality assurance systems. Complement these measures with investments in fair pay, decent working conditions, training and certification, professional development and social protection for childcare workers.
- 7. Strengthen implementation, transparency and accountability of childcare services:** Establish publicly accessible childcare-provider registries, clear application procedures for families and providers, regular quality monitoring and inspections, and public reporting on service quality to improve access, inform parental choice and ensure that childcare standards are effectively enforced.

Ultimately, accelerating progress on parenthood and childcare policies will require governments to adopt an integrated reform agenda that expands and scales up provision, strengthens implementation, and ensures that adequate resources, systems and institutional capacity are in place to support service

delivery. These reforms should advance on two fronts simultaneously: strengthening the legal and policy frameworks, while investing in the administrative, financing and service delivery infrastructure that determine whether entitlements are accessible to and used by the families who need them most.

ENDNOTES

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