

POLICY BRIEF



Building Care Economies for Gender-Inclusive Growth: Leadership from the Global South for the G20

2025

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Solidarity for the
Achievement
of the SDGs



Abstract

The care economy encompasses paid and unpaid activities related to childcare, eldercare, and domestic work. Globally, women perform approximately three times more unpaid care work than men, with this disparity rising to 11–12 times in developing economies. This gender gap significantly impacts women's labour force participation, with OECD estimates showing that a two-hour increase in women's unpaid work correlates with a 10% decrease in female workforce participation.

Yet, recognising its employment potential of creating 300 million jobs by 2035, many countries from the Global South are bringing policy frameworks to incentivise investments in the care economy. According to World Bank data, out of 130 emerging economies, 48 have legal provisions for government-supported childcare centres and 27 require employers to provide childcare facilities.

Several countries showcase diverse approaches to building inclusive care systems. Argentina introduced the Universal Child Benefit in 2009 and established an Inter-Ministerial Committee for Care Policies. Vietnam has developed a comprehensive childcare system, with three types of childcare facilities. India has devised a national care economy strategy and is targeting 17 000 publicly funded crèches by 2026. South Africa is implementing public–private partnerships in elderly care.

Studying a range of solutions for developing care economy systems in the Global South, this policy brief proposes a five-pillar framework for strengthening care economies across G20 countries: implementing gender-neutral parental leave policies, developing targeted subsidy programmes, investing in care facilities, creating standardised training programmes for care workers, and establishing quality assurance mechanisms. Success requires participatory policymaking, cross-sectoral collaboration, and adequate budgetary resources.

As demographics and family structures evolve globally, investing in care economies becomes both a social justice issue and an economic necessity. The Global South's innovative approaches offer valuable lessons to foster South–South cooperation and create sustainable, equitable care systems worldwide.

Keywords: Care Economy, Unpaid Care Work, Global South Innovation, Employment Generation, Care Infrastructure

Diagnosis

Care work is essential for economic prosperity, social stability and equality, and human flourishing.¹ This essential work – both paid (primarily performed by care workers) and unpaid (disproportionately shouldered by women) – creates the invisible infrastructure upon which broader economic activities depend. Care work encompasses both direct personal assistance (feeding, bathing, providing medical care) and indirect support functions (cooking, cleaning, household management) that sustain daily life. While unpaid care work receives no monetary compensation, paid care services – performed by domestic workers and other professionals – generate economic value through formal remuneration. Oxfam estimated that unpaid care work contributes roughly \$11 trillion² to the global economy annually.³ Women and girls account for roughly 70% of the world's care workforce and face significant disparities in earnings, employment and physical protections, professional advancement, and formal labour force participation.

The economic justification for investing in child and elder care is compelling, potentially creating 300 million jobs by 2035 while closing gender employment gaps.⁴ The care economy accelerates progress on multiple SDGs.⁵ Following the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased care work visibility, global policy dialogues have prioritised this agenda.⁶

¹ UN Women. "A Toolkit on Paid and Unpaid Care Work: From JRs to 5Rs." UN Women, 2022.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/07/a-toolkit-on-paid-and-unpaid-care-work>.

² Approximately 9% of global GDP

³ Coffey, Clare, Patricia Espinoza Revollo, Rowan Harvey, Max Lawson, Anam Parvez Butt, Kim Piaget, Diana Sarosi, and Julie Thekkudan. "Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Global Inequality Crisis." Methodology Note. Oxford: Oxfam International, 2020. https://webassets.oxfamamerica.org/media/documents/FINAL_bp-time-to-care-inequality-200120-en.pdf

⁴ UN Women. "Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment." ([Link](#))

⁵ Ending poverty (SDG 1), good health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work (SDG 8), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10).

⁶ The Global Alliance for Care (2021), Bali Care Economy Dialogue (2022), Women Deliver pre-conference (2023), and the ILO's resolution on decent work and care economy (2024).

The G20 has increasingly focused on care economy since 2014, when it pledged to reduce gender gaps in labour force participation by 25% by 2025.⁷ Recent Global South presidencies have expanded the agenda to include elder care, care infrastructure, and gender norms. Both Indonesia (2022) and India (2023) committed to promoting affordable care infrastructure and addressing unequal distribution in care work.

Brazil's G20 presidency advanced gender equality by promoting equal participation of women in the economy, encouraging men's involvement in care work, and challenging gender norms around caregiving responsibilities.⁸

Care has become a critical priority for W20 and T20 engagement groups, with the W20 Care Economy Working Group proposing best practices, including paid parental leave schemes. The South African presidency establishes solidarity, equality, and sustainability as transversal themes. South Africa will "focus on G20 priorities for women's advancement, including tackling workplace inequalities by increasing women's labour force participation; closing the gender pay gap; addressing the care economy (both paid and unpaid care work); and promoting women's financial inclusion."⁹

Lessons from the Global South

Several Global South countries are implementing innovative care economy approaches that challenge traditional resource-constraint narratives. Argentina's Universal Child Benefit (2009) provides financial assistance to caregivers for up to

⁷ Harris, Kelsey. "Who Cares? A 10-Year Analysis of G20 Care Commitments." Centre for Global Development, May 9, 2024. ([Link](#))

⁸ G20 Brazil. "G20 Rio de Janeiro Leaders' Declaration." November 2024. <https://g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/G20-Rio-de-Janeiro-Leaders-Declaration-EN.pdf>.

⁹ G20 South Africa. "Issue Note, Sherpa Track, Women Empowerment Working Group." December 2024. https://g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Issue-Note_Empowerment-of-Women-WG-EWWG-1.pdf.

five children. It has reached 1.6 million households, with 85% of beneficiaries in the lowest income deciles. In 2019, Argentina institutionalised a Time Use Survey within the national statistical system to gather gender-disaggregated data on unpaid care work. Taking a whole-of-government approach, the country established an Inter-Ministerial Committee for Care Policies in 2020. To address workplace needs, regulations introduced in 2022 require companies with over 100 workers to provide daycare facilities or financial support for remote workers, recognising the changing nature of work.¹⁰

Vietnam pioneered a unique childcare framework through its Education Law and Labour Code, mandating employer involvement in childcare facilities.¹¹ The 2023 Politburo Directive expanded public-private partnerships to address urbanisation challenges and reduce women's double burden.

South Africa has implemented Public Employment Programmes (PEPs) that simultaneously address unemployment while expanding social services. The Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and Home Community-Based Care (HCBC) programme create pathways for decent, sustainably paid care work enhancing employability and enabling participants to transition into private and public sectors after completion.¹² The programmes have supported employment generation in the care sector and raised awareness of the economic and social value of care work.

¹⁰ UNICEF. Universal Child Benefit Case Studies: The Experience of Argentina. July 2019.

<https://www.unicef.org/media/70446/file/ARG-case-study-2020.pdf>.

¹¹ World Bank Group. Tackling Childcare: The Business Case for Employer-Supported Childcare in Vietnam. August 2020.

¹² International Labour Organization (ILO). Care at Work: Investing in Care Leave and Services for a More Gender Equal World of Work. Geneva: ILO, 2022.

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_785238.pdf.

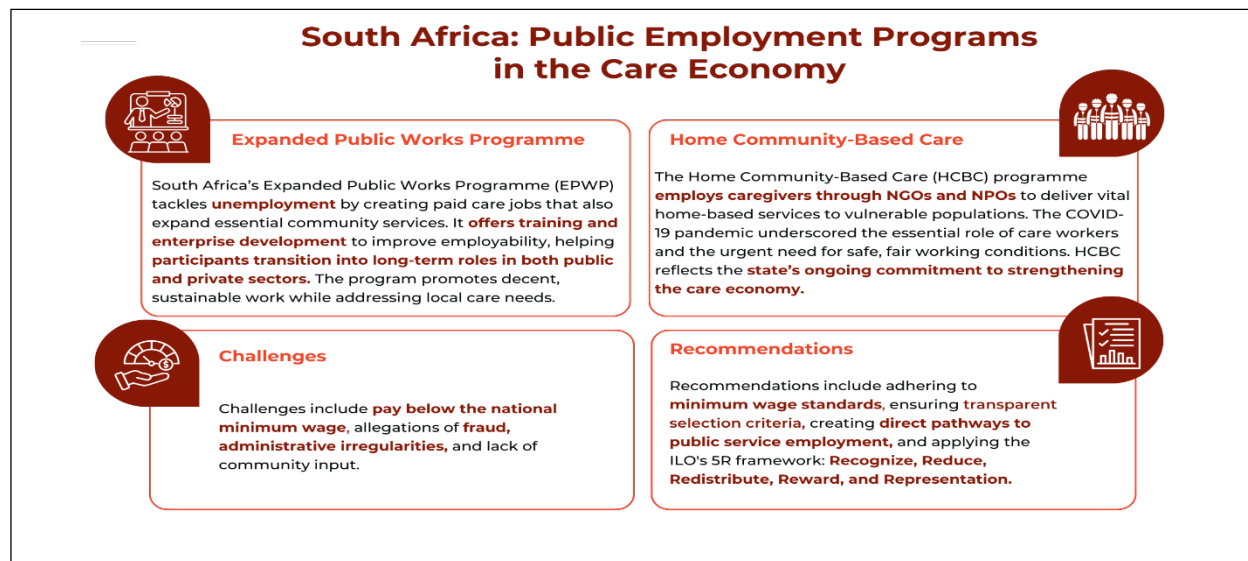


Figure 1 Public employment programmes in the care economy (South Africa)

India has developed a three-tier model for care delivery serving different socio-economic segments. The government's Palna/National Crèche Scheme supports working mothers from low-income households, while community-based organisations like COWE and SEWA provide strategically placed facilities near worksites for industrial and construction workers. The private sector brings international standards to the childcare landscape, with companies like KLAY offering extended services in metropolitan areas.

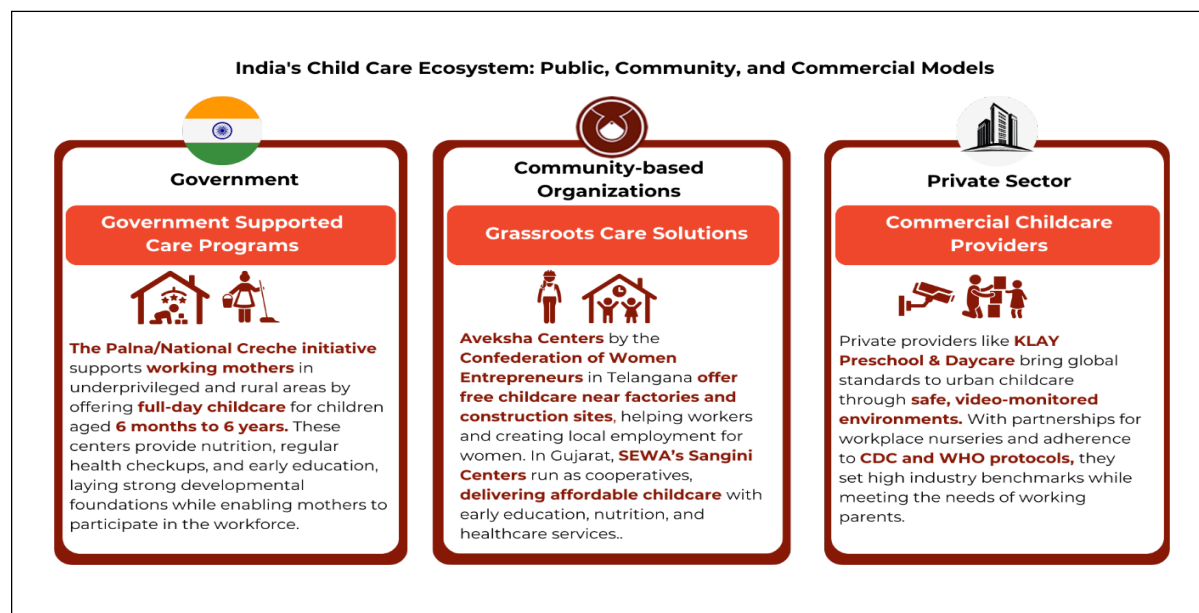


Figure 2 Models of India's child-care ecosystem

Brazil's National Care Policy represents a shift in care infrastructure design, reconceptualising care as a fundamental public right while implementing a multidimensional framework to address systemic inequities. The policy dismantles traditional care burden distributions by establishing comprehensive protection mechanisms for vulnerable populations while elevating the status and working conditions of care providers.¹³ By recognising care as a public right, Brazil has shifted the narrative from care as a private, family-based responsibility (primarily women's work) to a collective, state-supported obligation.

¹³ Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger (MDS). "Brazil Prepares Proposal for a National Care Policy and a National Care Plan." Portal Gov.br. <https://www.gov.br/trabalho-e-emprego/en/brazil-prepares-proposal-for-a-national-care-policy-and-a-national-care-plan>.



Figure 3 Brazil’s National Care Policy model

Recommendations

Bridging the gender gaps in domestic and care work can significantly boost women's labour force participation across G20 economies. Based on a review of over 50 interventions for care economy investments and services across G20 countries, five pillars for transforming the care economy emerge: (1) adaptive leave policies, (2) care service subsidies, (3) care infrastructure investment, (4) professional skill training for care workers, and (5) quality assurance mechanisms. These strategies aim to reduce gender-based time poverty and expand women's labour force participation.

G20 collective action on gender-neutral parental leave

The G20 should establish a multilateral framework for gender-sensitive parental leave that promotes shared caregiving and reduces stereotypes. This would

include coordinated standards for transitioning from maternity-focused to gender-neutral systems, similar to Sweden's 480 shared days model with wage replacement.¹⁴ Public-private cost-sharing mechanisms combining employer contributions, insurance schemes, and public funding can prevent disadvantaging women in the labour market. Non-contributory cash transfers could extend benefits to informal sector workers.¹⁵

Coordinated subsidies for care services

The G20 should establish a dedicated funding facility to support care service affordability through coordinated fiscal interventions. This could include a shared investment pool for implementing targeted subsidies similar to the US's child and dependant care tax credits or Australia's direct grants model. Countries should jointly develop policy toolkits for implementing these mechanisms across diverse economic contexts, with special attention to supporting women-led enterprises and underserved communities. Furthermore, the G20 could create financial instruments that enable cross-border investment in care services, facilitating knowledge transfer between advanced and emerging economies.¹⁶

Multilateral investment in care infrastructure

G20 nations should establish a Care Infrastructure Development Fund to strengthen service delivery networks globally. This fund would support centrally sponsored schemes for both childcare centres and eldercare facilities, with special focus on reaching rural and marginalised communities across member countries. Additionally, countries may develop standardised regulatory frameworks for public-private partnerships in care services, including model

¹⁴ Nikore, Mitali, Margo Thomas, Sunaina Kumar, Florencia Caro Sachetti, Gloria Langat, Gala Díaz Langou, Carolina Robino, Mannat Sharma, and Sukriti Anand. "Leveraging Care Economy Investments to Unlock Economic Development and Foster Women's Economic Empowerment in G20 Economies." T20 Policy Brief, June 2023. ([Link](#))

¹⁵ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Nikore Associates, Confederation of Indian Industry, and Karmannaya Counsel, Formulating a Strategy for India's Care Economy: Unlocking Opportunities, Government of India, 2024 ([Link](#))

¹⁶ Nikore, Mitali, et al "Leveraging Care Economy Investments to Unlock Economic Development and Foster Women's Economic Empowerment in G20 Economies." T20 Policy Brief, June 2023. ([Link](#))

concession agreements applicable across diverse economic contexts. The G20 could also create an infrastructure knowledge hub that enables sharing of architectural designs, technological innovations, and facility management practices to accelerate implementation.¹⁷

Standardised training for care workers

The G20 should establish a Global Care Skills Alliance to professionalise care work through coordinated skill development, certification frameworks, and labour mobility pathways. Building on Japan's Specified Skilled Worker Programme model, this alliance would develop internationally recognised credentials for care workers, facilitating ethical migration between countries with aging populations and those with younger workforces.¹⁸ G20 countries could establish national skills development councils to design comprehensive frameworks defining care sector roles, specialisations, and advancement tracks.

Shared quality assurance standards

Establishing robust regulatory frameworks ensures high-quality care and evidence-based policy development. G20 countries should implement national-level institutional frameworks to monitor care service delivery, with defined minimum standards for infrastructure and service quality, while allowing context-specific adaptation at state and local levels. Examples include the UK's Office for Standards in Education, which sets clear benchmarks; and Singapore's Enhanced Nursing Home Standards, focusing on safe clinical care, psychosocial wellbeing, and organisational management.¹⁹

¹⁷ Jackman, Mahalia and Simon Naitram. 2021. Making a Case for Investment in Universal Childcare in Barbados. UN Women. ([Link](#))

¹⁸ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Nikore Associates, Confederation of Indian Industry, and Karmannaya Counsel, Formulating a Strategy for India's Care Economy: Unlocking Opportunities, Government of India, 2024 ([Link](#))

¹⁹ Nikore, Mitali. "Building Care Economies for Gender-Inclusive Global Development: Leadership from the Global South." Observer Research Foundation, September 17, 2024. <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20240917130501.pdf>.

Conclusion

The Global South is experiencing a significant demographic shift, marked by rapid population growth and an ageing population, along with increasing urbanisation and impacts of climate change – factors that are collectively driving a demand for equitable care work. As this paper demonstrates, the innovative models of care emerging from countries in the Global South have the potential to promote a distinct Southern discourse on care.

Appendix: Case studies on care economy models

Case study name: Care Economy Model Practiced in South Africa²⁰	
Implementing year	2004 onwards (EPWP launched in 2004; HCBC and care economy initiatives gained prominence in the early 2000s and were further emphasised during the COVID-19 pandemic)
Implementing agency	Government of South Africa (notably through Public Employment Programmes such as the Expanded Public Works Programme - EPWP and Home Community-Based Care - HCBC), supported by NGOs, NPOs, and influenced by frameworks like the ILO's 5R. ²¹
About the model	The care economy in South Africa operates through public, private, and informal sectors, with significant contributions from NGOs and NPOs. Women dominate both paid and unpaid care work, but face issues of undervaluation and underpayment. The EPWP and HCBC reflect the state's commitment to the care sector by providing employment in caregiving roles. However, issues like sub-minimum wages, lack of transparency, and administrative irregularities affect program effectiveness. The model draws on the ILO's 5R framework to enhance dignity and fairness in care work.
Impact	The programmes have supported employment generation in the care sector and raised awareness of the economic and social value of care work. Despite challenges in implementation, they reflect a progressive move toward integrating care work into national employment strategies. Recommendations for improvement aim to bolster pay standards, transparency, and access to permanent employment.

Case study name: Barbados' Targeted Expansion of Childcare²²	
Implementing year	2021 onwards (based on national research and policy recommendations initiated in the UN Women report)
Implementing agency	Government of Barbados, in collaboration with UN Women Caribbean; supported by local stakeholders including public sector agencies, private childcare providers, and community organisations
About the model	This initiative reflects the "Investment in Care Infrastructure" pillar of a broader five-pillar policy framework. Recognising the transformative potential of universal childcare in advancing gender equality and reducing poverty, Barbados undertook a national data collection effort to identify gaps and inform policy. The central recommendation is the targeted expansion of childcare, combining direct intervention (increasing public childcare centres) and indirect support (facilitating private sector involvement). Proposed strategies include reserving spaces in childcare centres for children from low-income households and introducing state subsidies. The model stresses the importance of increased investment from both public and private sectors in building care infrastructure.

²⁰ Parliamentary Monitoring Group. *Expanded Public Works Programme: Oversight & Monitoring Report*. Cape Town: Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2017.

²¹ International Labour Organization. *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*. Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2018.

²² Jackman, Mahalia, and Simon Naitram. *Making a Case for Investment in Universal Childcare in Barbados*. New York: UN Women, 2021.

Impact	The model represents a forward-thinking shift toward inclusive care systems. While still in early stages of implementation, it provides a roadmap for enhancing access to childcare services, empowering women to engage in paid work, and addressing social inequalities. Barbados sets a precedent for data-driven, equity-focused care policies in the Caribbean and small island developing states.
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Case study name: Parental Benefits in Sweden²³	
Implementing year	1995
Implementing agency	Swedish Social Insurance Agency
About the model	Additionally, during the child's first year, there is an opportunity for both parents to take parental leave benefits during the same period for no more than 30 days (so-called 'double days'). 384 days of parental benefit must be taken before the child's fourth birthday. The remaining 96 days can be saved and taken, at the latest, before the child turns 12 or until the child finishes the fifth grade. For children born in 1995 onwards, 77 percent of fathers have used parental leave before the child reached 4 years of age.
Impact	Through such policies, Sweden has been able to combine relatively high fertility levels with high female labour force participation rates and low child poverty.

Case study name: Universal Child Benefit (<i>Asignación Universal por Hijo - AUH</i>), Argentina²⁴	
Implementing year	2009 (Established through Presidential Decree No. 1602/2009)
Implementing agency	National Social Security Administration (ANSES), Government of Argentina
About the model	The AUH is a tax-financed child allowance aimed at informal workers, unemployed individuals, domestic workers, seasonal workers, and low-income self-employed persons. It provides monthly payments for up to five children under 18 (no age limit for children with disabilities). The benefit varies by region—approximately USD 57 (2,652–3,448 pesos) per child and USD 187 (8,642–11,235 pesos) for a child with a disability. Eligibility requires meeting conditions like school attendance and compliance with health checkups and vaccinations.
Impact	AUH expanded social protection to vulnerable populations, improving school attendance, health outcomes, and reducing poverty. As of 2017, the programme cost 0.6% of Argentina's GDP and covered millions of children.

²³ Institute for Future Studies. The Future of Gender Equality. Stockholm: Institute for Future Studies, 2005.

²⁴ Administración Nacional de la Seguridad Social (ANSES). Information, Amounts for Universal Child Allowance Effective from March 1, 2019. Buenos Aires: ANSES, 2019.

Case study name: Brazil’s Proposal for a National Care Policy and Care Plan²⁵	
Implementing year	2023-2024
Implementing agency	Ministry of Social Development (MDS), Ministry of Women (MM), Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA)
About the model	Brazil is drafting a comprehensive National Care Policy and Care Plan to address structural inequalities in care responsibilities. It aims to guarantee the right to care for all, promote gender equality, and recognise, redistribute, and value unpaid and paid care work. The initiative focuses on the unfair burden of care on women—especially Black women—and promotes shared responsibility across families, communities, and institutions.
Impact	Still in development, the policy intends to ensure universal access to care services, promote decent work for paid caregivers, and reduce the gendered barriers to employment. It is grounded in national data showing that 30% of women forgo employment due to care responsibilities, with racial disparities compounding the issue.

Case study name: Tackling Childcare: The Business Case for Employer-Supported Childcare in Vietnam²⁶	
Implementing year	2021
Implementing agency	International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group
About the model	The study explores various models of employer-supported childcare in Vietnam, including onsite childcare facilities, childcare subsidies, partnerships with external providers, and flexible work policies. The report showcases examples from companies such as Pou Chen, Viettel Group, and TMA Solutions, demonstrating how investment in childcare can yield returns through improved employee retention, reduced absenteeism, and increased productivity. The model emphasises that supporting childcare is not only a social good but a strategic business decision.
Impact	Employer-supported childcare has led to improved workforce participation among women, reduced turnover and absenteeism, and higher job satisfaction and productivity. For example, Pou Chen’s onsite kindergarten supported over 1,000 children, contributing to retention among its 60,000+ employees. Viettel and TMA Solutions also reported positive outcomes from flexible policies and childcare support. The study presents strong evidence that childcare initiatives enhance business performance while promoting gender equality.
Source: International Finance Corporation. Tackling Childcare: The Business Case for Employer-Supported Childcare in Vietnam. Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2021	

²⁵ Brazilian Government. Presentation at the G20 Working Group on Employment, 2nd Meeting. Brasília: Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Women, April 2024.

²⁶ International Finance Corporation. Tackling Childcare: The Business Case for Employer-Supported Childcare in Vietnam. Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2021.

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