



Carrying the System: Women's Invisible Burden in South Africa's Childcare System

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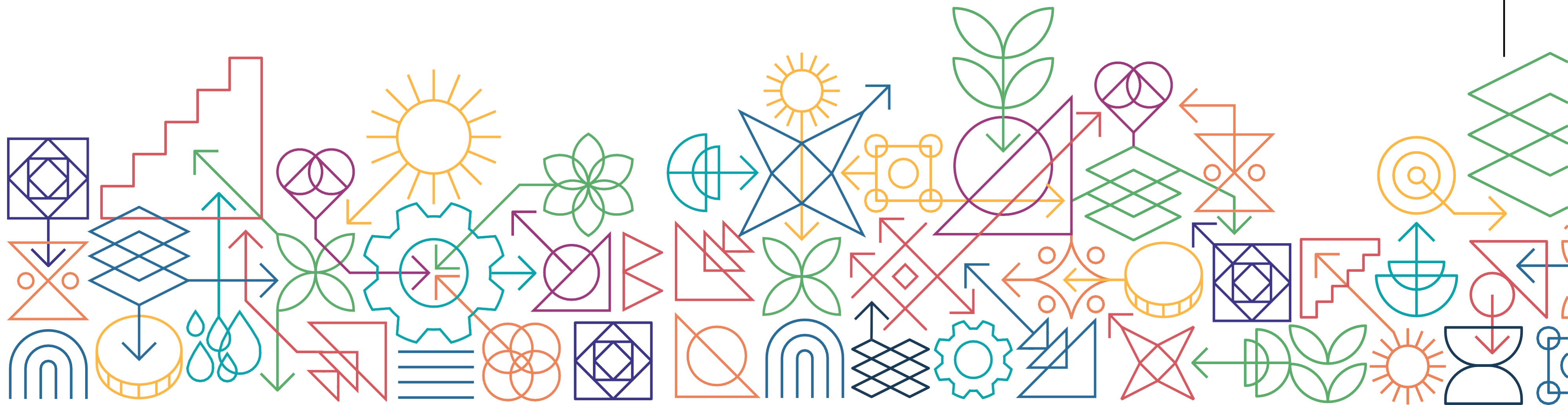


Unlocking affordable and quality
childcare to benefit women,
children, and the broader society

A review of the South African
childcare system

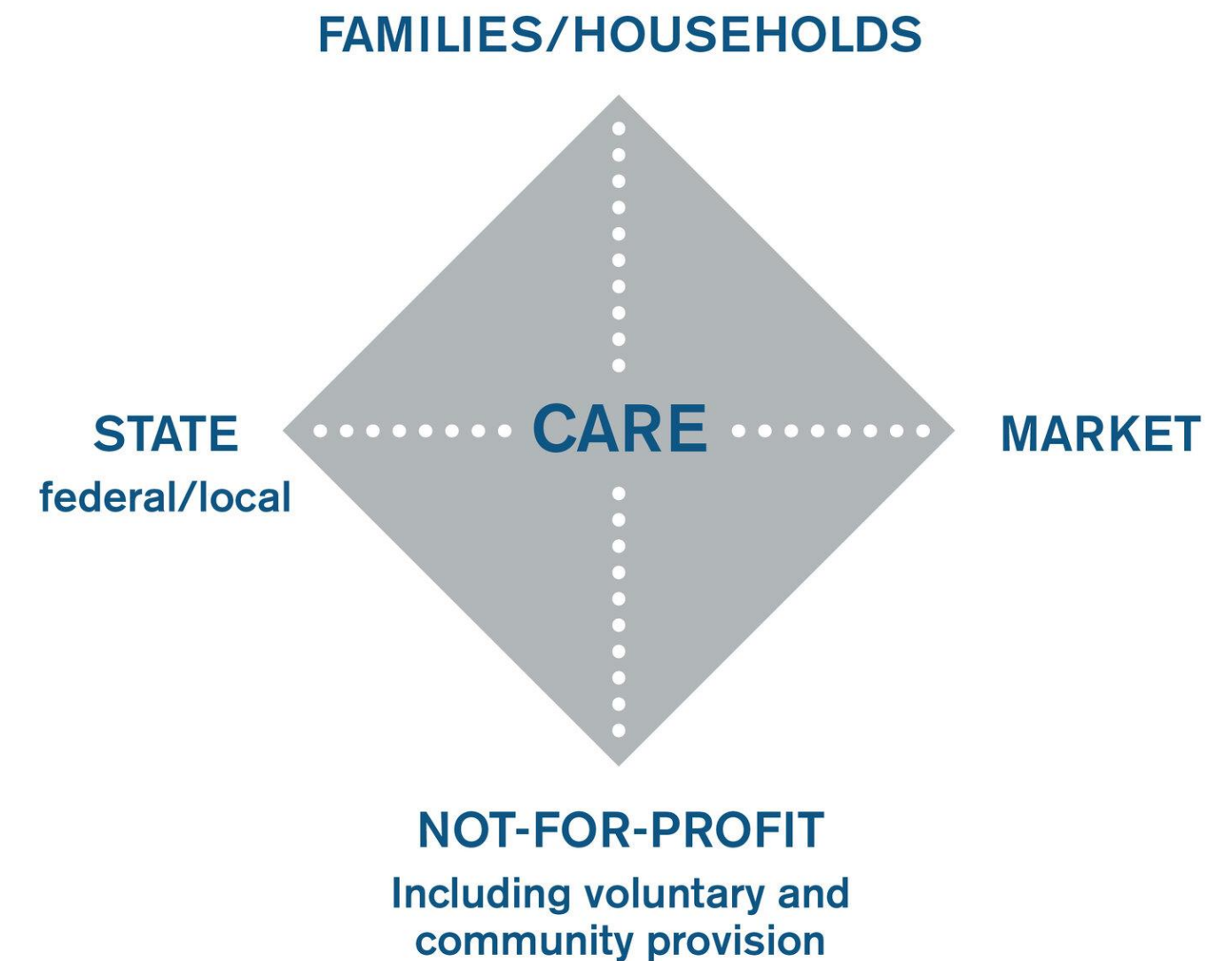
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Setting the scene



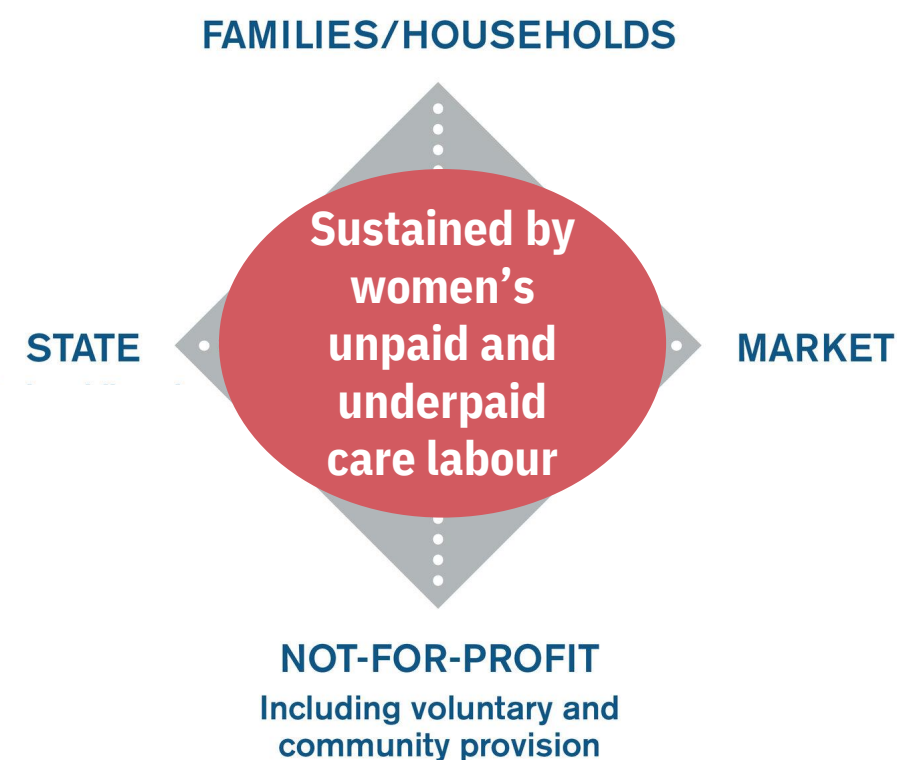
What is a childcare system?

A set or network of services, policies, regulations, resources and infrastructure that the state, not-for-profit sector, markets and families/households collectively provide to support the care of children from birth to age six to enable families (particularly women) to balance their caregiving and other responsibilities.



Razavi's (2007) posits **a distinct and pivotal role for the state as a decision-maker whose actions shape the responsibilities** assumed by other institutions within the diamond

South Africa's care regime – a hybrid system shaped by inequality (1)



Policy design centres the family

- 1997 *White Paper for Social Welfare* and the 2012 *White Paper on Families* place the family as the primary provider and assign the state a supportive role and is criticized for ignoring gendered patterns of care provision.
- The 2021 Revised White Paper on Families takes this criticism into account; however, it continues to see the role of the state as supportive and fails to include indicators to monitor gender and parental division in childcare work (Hatch, 2023).

Dual system shaped by apartheid legacy persists along income, gender and racial lines

- Formal care regime accessed by high-income households has retained “liberal” features (Button et al., 2018).
- These households buy childcare and domestic labour, insure themselves and purchase personal care in their homes or private institutions when members reach old age.
- The informal care regime largely accessed by Black African households is characterised by continued dependence on the family (primarily women) and has thus retained conservative features (Mahon, 2018).

Neoliberal economic policymaking and programming

- Neoliberal reforms **reduced the state's role in direct provision of services** (e.g. GEAR) leaving other institutions within the care diamond to close this gap
- This **persisting neoliberal architecture of the South African economy** is argued to continue to explain the significant gaps in the provision of quality care.
- These gaps are imperfectly addressed through markets and largely resolved through **a reliance on the unpaid and undervalued care labour of women** (Kasan, 2024).

The care regime relies on a hybrid model but in practice it is **sustained by the unpaid and underpaid care work of women.**

South Africa's care regime – a hybrid system shaped by inequality (2)

Blind to gender dynamics thereby reinforcing gendered patterns of care.

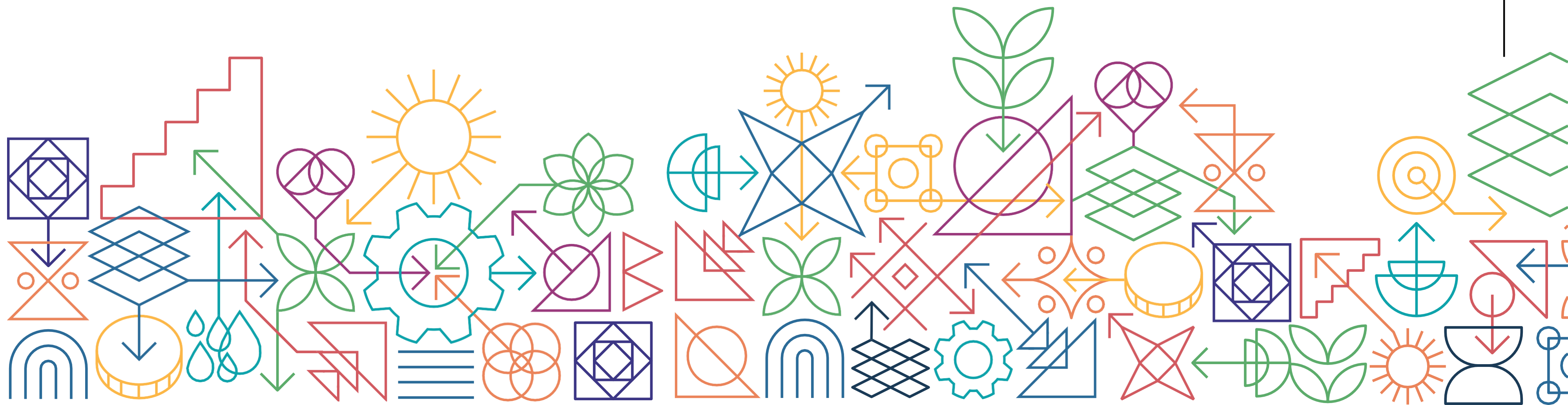
- Gendered nature of care within families is largely invisible or under-acknowledged in policy and programming but are both blind to the gendered nature of care provision within families
- The care regime's reliance on women is made possible by **South Africa's patriarchal system that privileges men over women**, which includes harmful gender norms and attitudes that violate women's rights and lead to structural gender imbalances in the provision of care.

A long legacy of family disruption

- Family structures have undergone **dramatic structural changes**: extended family living, African children not residing with biological fathers.
- The migrant labour system, over decades of institutionalised racial segregation under the apartheid regime, **scaled up and entrench patrilineal system's normalisation of extended family living as the dominant family structure in the country.**
- Female primary caregivers in mother-only or neither-parent households **are primarily assisted solely by other women.**
- HIV/AIDS epidemic, high levels of unemployment and significant increase in the value of the Old Age Pension are key factors that have **restructured the role of older people in family networks in South Africa.**

The **reproduction of inequality remains central to the architecture of South Africa's care regime**, resulting in its failure to comprehensively address the needs of South African families and unlock care's social and economic benefits.

South Africa's childcare system



Components of South Africa's childcare system

Childcare system component	State	Markets	NPOs	Families/ households
Programmes and provisioning				
Childcare provision	X	X	X	X
Social assistance/cash transfers	X			
Maternal and child health programmes	X	X	X	
Family and caregiver support/strategies	X	X	X	X
Public and private funding				
Subsidies to parents for childcare			None	
Subsidies to childcare providers	X		X	
Incentives for employers			None	
Tax regime support			None	
Policies and legislation				
Public entitlements	X			
Parental and family leave	X	X	X	
Child maintenance	X		X	X
Prevailing gender norms and attitudes				
Shifting gender norms	X	X	X	X



Essential package of ECD services

Childcare provision



The state of childcare provision (specifically ECD programmes)



Programmes

- 42 000+ programmes, mostly small and community based
- Self-starting providers dominate
- Weak formal support, monitoring and uneven quality

Supply exists but it is fragmented and poorly supported

Workforce

- 198 000+ workers
- Operating independently
- Low and unstable incomes
- Limited ability to hire staff, invest or expand

Strong workforce that is severely economically constrained

Funding

- 69% of programmes rely primarily on fees
- R24 per child per day subsidy (*far below cost of provision*)
- Only 27% of the 2.3 million eligible children currently receive the subsidy

System is primarily privately funded with partial subsidisation

Child access

- 1 million+ children aged 3 to 5 do not have access
- 77% of non-enrolled children excluded due to inability to pay fees

Demand is suppressed by affordability

Learning outcomes

- Only 42% of children aged 50 to 59 months are developmentally on track
- 82% not on track in at least one domain
- Quality varies widely across different context

Unequal access and quality produce unequal learning outcomes

Regulatory context

- Registration acts as a gateway funding but complex requirements and processes exclude many providers
- Policy and funding are misaligned — early learning is treated as education in policy, but funded as a partial welfare subsidy

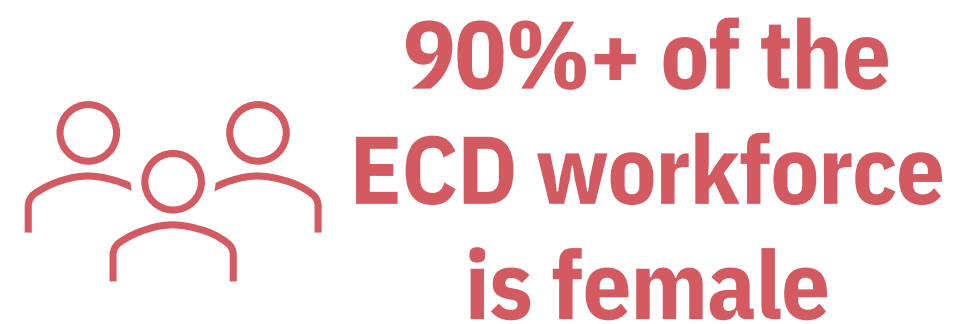
Strong policy intent but funding level and design misaligned

Who carries the childcare system?

1. Women absorb unpaid care burden



2. Women sustain the childcare workforce



3. Women shoulder the administrative burden

Women are the **primary users of the maintenance system**, reflecting their role as primary caregivers and the burden of securing financial support for children.

95%+ of Child Support Grant recipients are **women**, reflecting their role as primary caregivers.

4. Women bear the economic penalties

1.8 million (88%)

of the more than 2.0 million labour force participants who reported not working because of family considerations or childcare are women.

54.0% of women participate in the labour force compared to 64.6% of men

Sources: StatsSA 2010, Commission for Gender Equality 2021, DBE 2021, StatsSA 2025, General Household Survey 2024

A structural contradiction: regulated as education, funded welfare

Childcare performs **three functions simultaneously...**



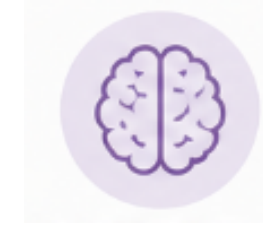
1. Care and supervision

Children need to be safely looked after while adults work, search for work, or manage household survival.



2. Labour market enablement

An economic enabler, especially for women. It reduces time constraints, allows participation in work (in the sector and elsewhere), education or income-generating activity



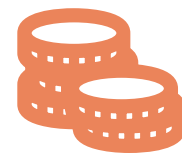
3. Early learning and development

Organised programmes support cognitive, language, social-emotional and physical development, and therefore matter for later educational trajectories.

...BUT the **system is misaligned**



Policy discourse and regulation increasingly **emphasise the third function, early learning (education).**



Current child welfare funding model reflects the first function. Families are expected to **secure care privately and pay what they can and the state subsidises**



The second function, labour market enablement, remains **under-addressed**, even though it provides a strong public-interest rationale for state funded early learning.



The current model tries to produce **education outcomes with welfare-like funding** and private-household driven cost recovery.



Provision continues to operate through a market-based model in which **services expand where they are financially viable**. Quality and access continue to vary across contexts.

The system remains caught between two logics: one in which **access is shaped by economic viability**, and another where it is **expected to be universal and equitable**. To resolve this tension, **we need to rethink our reliance on market mechanisms to deliver a service with strong public-good characteristics.**

What changes for women when childcare systems work?

Evidence from the Global South

Argentina

On average, 13 mothers started to work for every 100 youngest children that attended pre-school (Berlinski et al., 2011).

Uruguay

Where childcare programmes merely substitutes informal arrangements, it may have little to no effect on women's labour force participation (Batthyány & Genta, 2020).

Brazil

Publicly provided daycare programme led to rise in **labour force participation which was primarily driven by grandparents and adolescent siblings**, not parents, as many were already working. (Attanasio et al, 2022)

Latin America and the Caribbean

Significant effects of childcare on maternal labour supply, noting that this evidence was **consistent regardless of the type of arrangement (formal or informal)** used for childcare (Diaz & Rodriguez-Chamussy, 2013).

Burkina Faso

Positive effects on women's employment and **a greater impact from women securing jobs as childcare providers** (Ajayi et al., 2022).

Design conditions (Halim et al., 2021)

- Whether it was **designed with or without the mother** in mind (opening hours)
- **Child's age:** women found to be more willing to place older children and maternal labour outcomes found to be strongest for ages 3 to 8 years old.
- **Targeting low-income households:** mixed results were found for concentrating on low-income households. (economic opportunities are low hence complementary support required)

Shifting gender norms and attitudes



The state of gender norms and attitudes in South Africa

59.6% women Ever-partnered women/men agreed that a woman’s most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family.

66.6% men

69.5% Of men believe that a woman should obey her husband

The HSRC 2024 study of Gender-Based Violence in South Africa finds that South African society **remains deeply patriarchal, with widely held views by both women and men that a woman’s place is in the home** (Zungu et al., 2024).

	2012	2022	Change
The mother should take the entire paid leave period and the father should not take any paid leave.	61	46	-15
The mother should take most of the paid leave period and the father should take some of it.	24	30	5
The mother and the father should each take half of the paid leave period.	12	20	8
The father should take most of the paid leave period and the mother should take some of it.	1	2	2
The father should take the entire paid leave period and the mother should not take any paid leave.	1	1	0
(Do not know)	1	1	0
Total	100	100	0

Note: Survey question: “Still thinking about the same couple, if both are in a similar work situation and are eligible for paid leave, how should this paid leave period be divided between the mother and the father?”
Source: HSRC SASAS, 2012, 2022

Despite high levels of unemployment, **South African men are still expected to be the primary breadwinners** (Rabe, 2021).

The State of Fathers’ report of 2021 found that **unemployed and poor men who are unable to provide for their children often face shame and humiliation** and are more likely to disengage from their families (Malinga, 2021).

The state of norm-shifting efforts

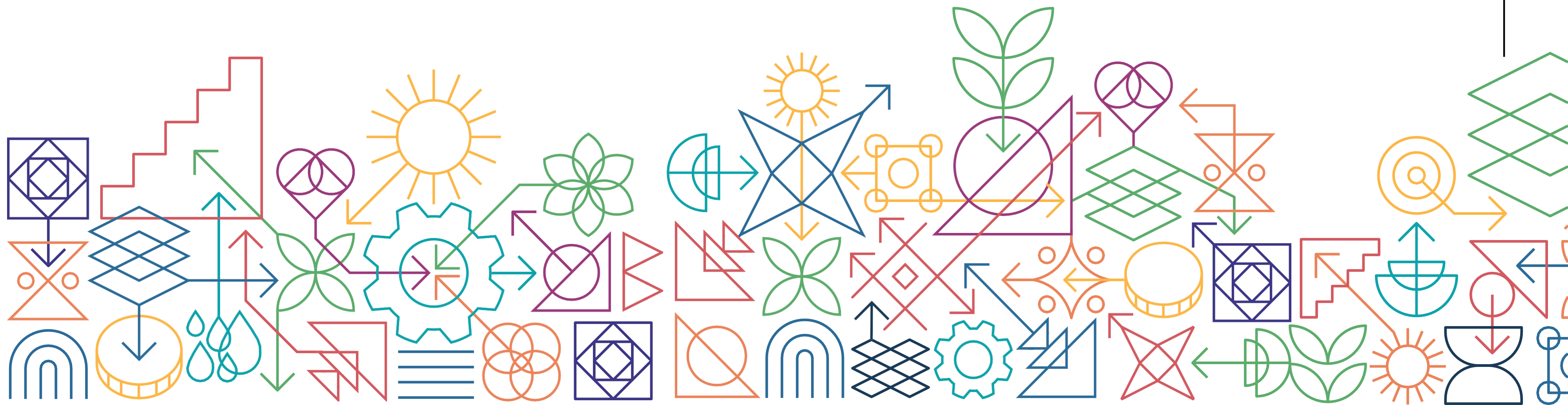
Critical gender equality and women's empowerment issues	Significant progress	Good progress	Moderate progress	Limited progress	No progress
Entrenching South Africa's vision and mandate for gender equality	😊				
Formulating policies and legislation that are gender responsive		😊			
Implementing policies and legislation for gender equality			😞		
Overcoming the challenges of poverty for women			😞		
Women's representation at the political, leadership and local government level	😊				
Women's representation in the public sector	😊				
Women's representation in the private sector			😞		
Promoting women's economic emancipation			😞		
Social transformation and social justice: women's access to services			😞		
Social transformation and social justice: women and social protection		😊			
Social transformation and social justice: women's health and wellbeing					
Social transformation and social justice: women education and skills development		😊			
Women's and girls' right to be free of violence					😞
Promoting women's role in the environment/green economy		😊			
Gender responsive policies, planning, research, budgeting, monitoring, evaluation and auditing across government			😞		
Address patriarchy, sex, stereotyping, and gendered roles and division of labour					😞
Address women's unequal share of unpaid care work and household responsibility in the GDP					😞

Beijing Platform for Action South Africa’s 2024 self-assessment of progress with respect to gender equality and women empowerment issues in the

Norm-shifting efforts rarely address the biggest norm of all: **that families, and especially women, should absorb care when the state and market fail.**

A critical gap is interventions that seek to shift norms around distribution of care work between families and the state, **emphasising the recognition of care as a public good for which the state should play a greater role.**

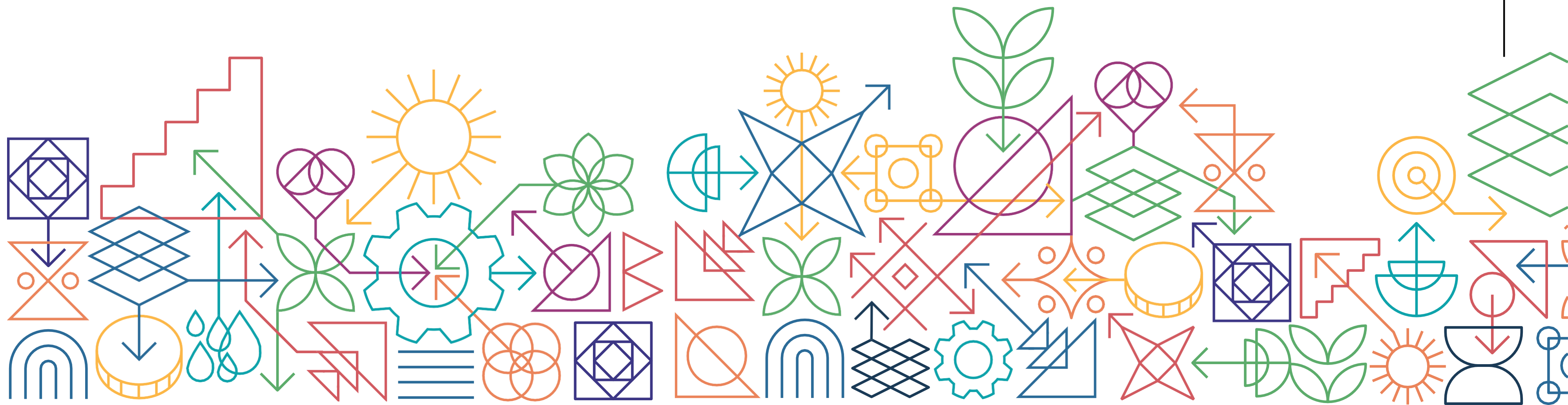
Conclusion



In closing...

1. The review shows that South Africa's childcare system currently relies on **women's unpaid and underpaid labour to compensate for gaps in public provision, funding and support.**
2. While important progress has been made in ECD, policy and funding continue to **driving this agenda without locating it within the broader childcare system and treating childcare as essential social and economic infrastructure**
3. Our efforts have **centred on realising children's rights** and their development outcomes and largely considered women's outcomes as a secondary. This is **despite a commitment to gender equality and women's economic participation**
4. Unlocking the full benefits of childcare requires a shift towards **integrating both children's and women's rights within a holistic view of the childcare system and recognising of childcare as a public good that necessary for socio-economic wellbeing**

Recommendations



Critical actions to shift the state of the system

Recognise and fund childcare as a public good for which the state has primary responsibility

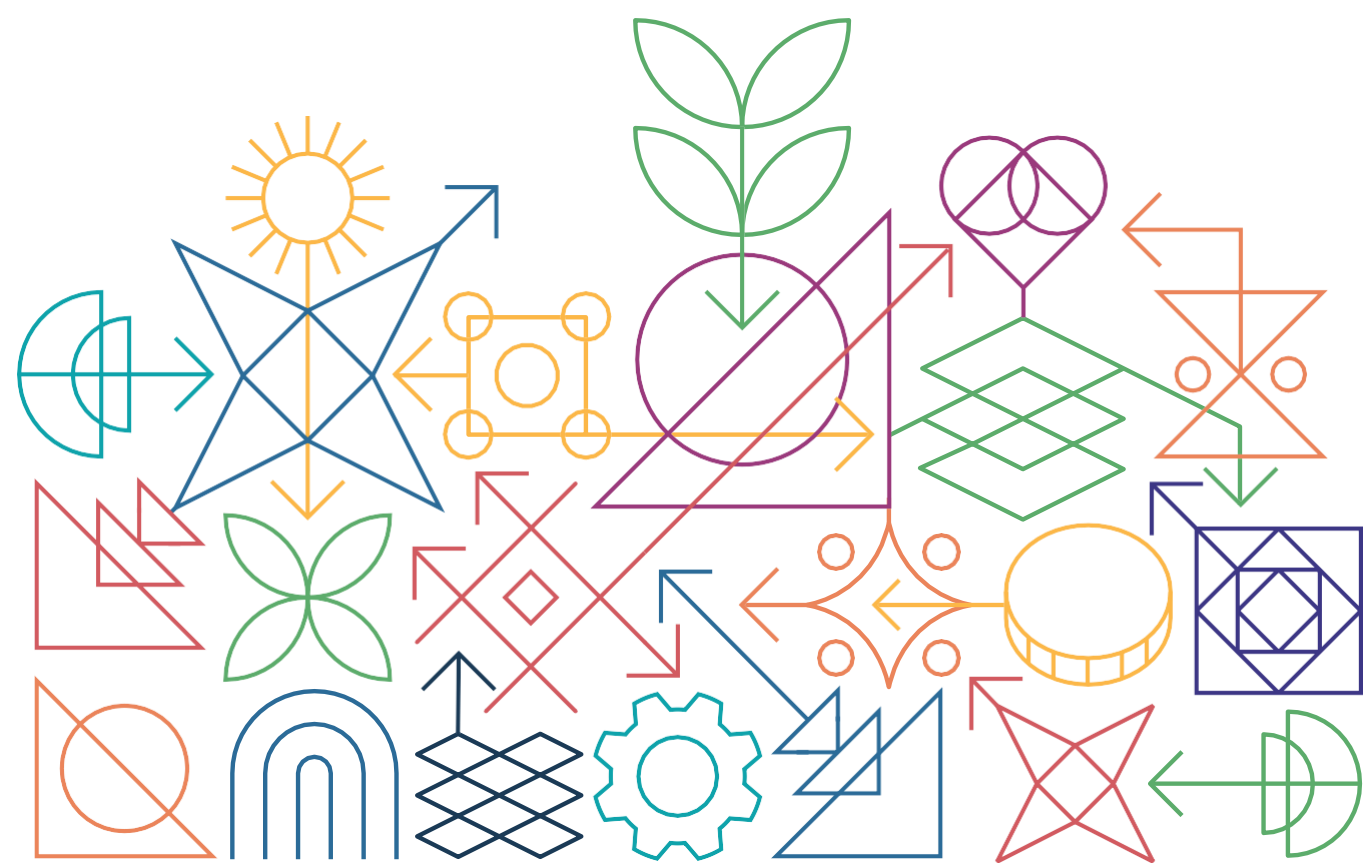
Adopt a systems approach to childcare policy, planning and programming .

Increase and reallocate funding to ensure sustainability and equity across all system components.

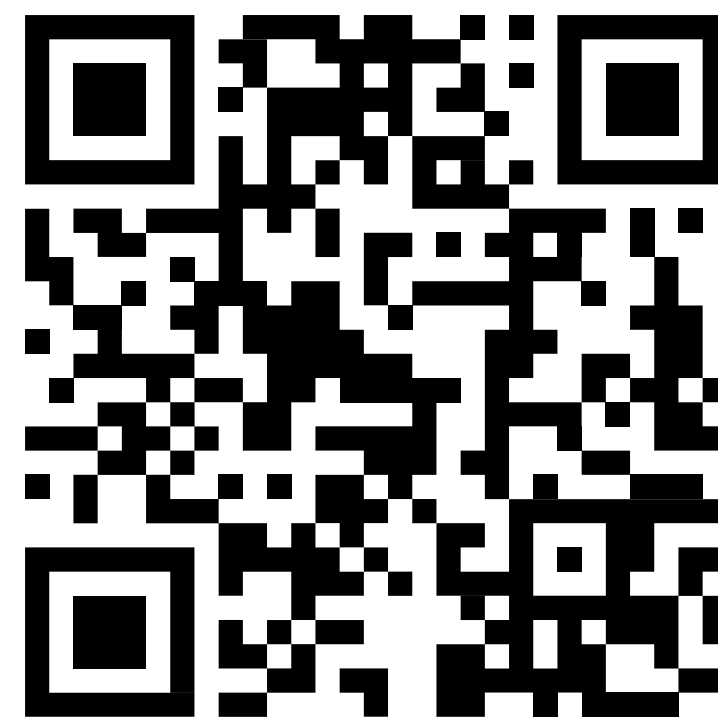
Implement existing recommendations on service provision and child maintenance enforcement.

Close national data and evidence gaps e.g. causal effect of childcare on women's labour market outcomes

Launch a coordinated, long-term national campaign and design interventions to shift societal norms around care.



Thank you!



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