

► Empowering women entrepreneurs through and within the care economy

This overview presents the ILO Women's Entrepreneurship Development Programme's priority area on care in line with its 2025–2030 strategic plan.

Transforming care from barrier to opportunity: Unlocking women's entrepreneurship for inclusive and sustainable growth

Globally, care responsibilities remain the most cited reason by women for being outside the labour market¹, with women performing the majority of unpaid care work². Women entrepreneurs, in particular, are also often excluded from care leave policies and lack access to institutional support for caregiving³. While evidence remains limited, studies suggest that the absence of affordable, accessible, and quality care services, along with insufficiently adequate policies, undermines women entrepreneurs' ability to launch, sustain and grow their businesses, reducing profitability⁴, resilience⁵, and access to decent work⁶.

Women entrepreneurs are important actors in the care economy, operating businesses that span the formal and informal sectors, and have a variety of sizes and structures. When adequately supported and regulated, their enterprises can play a critical role in meeting the increasing global demand for care services⁷. In addition, evidence suggests that women entrepreneurs often outperform their male counterparts in building high-impact care businesses and that they are more likely to hire women and promote them into leadership roles⁸.

Yet, women entrepreneurs in the care economy face significant challenges, including limited access to finance, complex or inadequate regulations, lack of skills recognition and difficulty in developing sustainable business models that deliver affordable, quality care services and create decent care jobs.

These barriers are compounded by a lack of data on local care markets and best practice examples, a lack of formal certifications and business skills, and restricting social norms and gender roles.



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¹ In 2023, 708 million women aged 15 and above were outside of the labour force due to care responsibilities as opposed to 40 million men. See ILO. 2024. [The impact of care responsibilities on women's labour force participation](#).

² ILO. 2018. [Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#).

³ Only 13.8 per cent of self-employed women globally live in a country that provides mandatory coverage of maternity leave in the form of cash-benefits for self-employed workers; while only 21 countries in the world guarantee universal access to free and affordable childcare services; see ILO. 2022. [Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work](#).

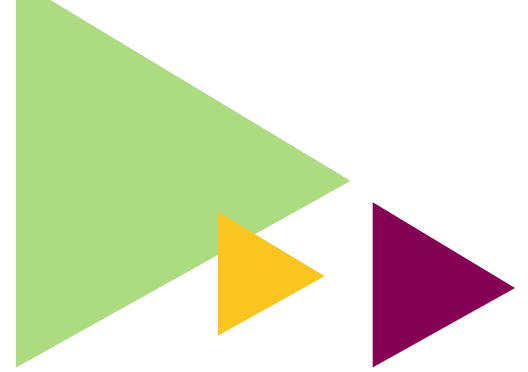
⁴ In Uganda, women with children aged 3 to 5 years who were offered one year of full-time subsidies for private childcare centres increased their business revenues by 47 percent on average compared to women who were not offered the childcare subsidies. See See Bjorvatn, K., D. Ferris, S. Gulesci, A. Nasgowitz, and V. Somville. 2022. [Childcare, Labor Supply, and Business Development: Experimental Evidence from Uganda](#).

⁵ Faced with external shocks, care support has been cited by women entrepreneurs as one of the three most critical measure for helping their business through the crisis. See Facebook, OECD, and World Bank Group. 2020. [Global State of Small Business Report](#).

⁶ ILO. 2022. [Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work](#).

⁷ WEF. 2023. [Global Gender Gap Report](#) and ILO. 2018. [Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#).

⁸ Kore Global. 2024. [Care enterprises founded by women are transforming the care economy and lifting other women](#).



ILO-WED's approach to advancing women's entrepreneurship in the care economy

The ILO's Women's Entrepreneurship Development (ILO-WED) Programme has supported women entrepreneurs worldwide for over 15 years. In line with the adoption of the 2024 ILO Resolution on decent work and the care economy, which reaffirmed the importance of the 5R Framework for Decent Care Work (Recognition, Reduction and Redistribution of unpaid care and Reward and Representation of care workers) and the ILO's leadership role in promoting decent work in the care economy, ILO-WED is piloting targeted support for women entrepreneurs as both providers and beneficiaries of care⁹.

More specifically, the programme is:

- Helping women start, formalize, operate, and grow care enterprises that offer decent work in the care sector, including by ensuring equal pay and prevention of violence and harassment.
- Promoting paid parental leave coverage and access to quality care services for women entrepreneurs and their workers, and

This approach aims to expand quality care provision, generate decent jobs, and foster a more gender-equal sharing of care responsibilities. It also strengthens the visibility and voice of care entrepreneurs and workers in social dialogue and policy processes, contributing to gender equality, economic empowerment, and inclusive growth.

⁹ Work is undertaken in close collaboration with the ILO Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Branch and Cooperative, Social and Solidarity Economy Unit.



299 million jobs could be created by 2035 if countries invested in the care economy.

Care at work. Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work / International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2022.





My new business fulfils my dream of nurturing kids and gives me additional income. Although I am still in the early stages of my entrepreneurial journey, I occasionally envision expanding the business in the future to establish a childcare centre.

Anastasia Chistol, ILO beneficiary and entrepreneur who started a creche for children under three in Chisinau, Moldova in 2024.

CASE STUDY

Expanding early childcare education services in Moldova

In 2023, the ILO launched a pilot initiative in Moldova to increase women's labour market participation by enhancing access to childcare services. The initiative supported the implementation of the National Programme on Care Services for Children Under Three and was aligned with new legislation on Alternative Childcare Services (Law No. 367/2022).

The pilot initiative, which aimed to identify solutions for addressing a critical gap in formal early childhood education and care options for children aged 0–3, was implemented in partnership with national social partners and the Agency for Women Entrepreneurship of Moldova.

During the pilot, the ILO worked to strengthen the policy and regulatory environment for childcare provision. This included conducting legal reviews on alternative family-type childcare services and preparing practical guidance for employers on implementing on-site care facilities. Findings were shared with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection to inform policy dialogue and reforms.

To promote understanding and acceptance of home-based childcare services, highlighting their safety, benefits, and contribution to both family well-being and women's economic empowerment, the ILO launched a public awareness campaign

which significantly increased interest in home-based care among working parents.

Further, the ILO supported women to establish family-style crèches by offering entrepreneurship training, business planning support, mentorship, and financial grants. A total of 27 women received support under the pilot, and three of them secured ILO grants to launch their own childcare services. Later, six additional women received grants from another development partner and successfully launched their childcare services too.

Together with social partners, the ILO also supported the establishment and testing of on-site childcare services. Under ILO's guidance and in partnership with the National Confederation of Employers Organisation, Orange Moldova tested an on-site childcare facility that complied with legal requirements and sanitary standards. In addition, support was provided to establish childcare facilities at the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the National Confederation of Trade Unions.

With support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the initiative is expanding to six additional regions across Moldova, with further scale-up of activities planned for 2025.

More information is available [here](#).



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home-based childcare
services launched



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report analyzing legal constraints
affecting childcare services

Looking ahead

The ILO remains firmly committed to dismantling systemic barriers, unlocking the full potential of women entrepreneurs, and advancing decent work for all. Moving forward, the ILO seeks to strengthen partnerships, scale effective solutions, and drive transformative change, ensuring that women everywhere have the tools, opportunities and rights to participate in and thrive as entrepreneurs and leaders in the care economy and beyond.

We invite governments, social partners, development actors, and other stakeholders to join us in shaping inclusive, caring economies where women's entrepreneurship can flourish.

To learn more or explore collaboration opportunities:

Women's Entrepreneurship Development Programme:

- o Website: www.ilo.org/wed
- o Email: wed@ilo.org

Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Branch:

- o Website: www.ilo.org/ged
- o Email: gedi@ilo.org

