

Rebalancing the Economy of Care: Policy Pathways to Reduce Gendered Poverty

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ABSTRACT

Gendered poverty persists as a systemic and global inequity rooted in the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work shouldered by women. Worldwide, women perform over 76% of unpaid care work, contributing an estimated \$10.8 trillion annually in invisible economic value (Oxfam, 2022). This invisible labour constrains women's access to formal employment, limits social and economic mobility, and reinforces poverty cycles, especially among single mothers and low-income households. This paper examines how comprehensive and accountable childcare and equitable parental leave systems and policies can redistribute care responsibilities, enhance women's labour force participation, and reduce gendered poverty. Employing secondary research, the study draws on labour market data, policy frameworks, and literature review from three welfare economies—Sweden, Norway, and Canada—to explore the socioeconomic impacts of care-supportive policy ecosystems. Findings reveal that in countries with universal childcare access and non-transferable, paid parental leave for both parents, women's labour force participation exceeds 75%, gender wage gaps fall below 12%, and child poverty rates are markedly lower. The paper advocates for the urgent integration of unpaid care work into national accounting and economic policymaking and agendas. It supports the global adoption of care-centred policies as a foundational strategy for achieving SDG-1 (No Poverty) and SDG-5 (Gender Equality). Ultimately, acknowledging and funding the care economy is not only imperative for gender equity, but it is an economic necessity.

1. Introduction

The Unpaid care work constitutes one of the most persistent and under-acknowledged gendered asymmetries within contemporary economic structures. While international frameworks such as those by UN Women (2015) and the International Labour Organization (2018) have formally recognised care as an indispensable pillar of human development and societal well-being, national policy regimes have largely failed to integrate it within economic planning and resource allocation (Addati et al., 2018; UN Women, 2015). This systemic exclusion has

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contributed to the institutional invisibility of unpaid care work, reinforcing gendered divisions of labour and exacerbating income and opportunity disparities (Razavi, 2007).

Feminist economic scholarship has long posited that unpaid care work undergirds the formal economy through the reproduction of labour and the provision of essential social goods (Folbre, 2012; Elson, 1995). Yet, despite its macroeconomic significance, this labour remains uncompensated, unmeasured, and structurally marginalised (Budlender & Moussié, 2013). The resulting disjuncture between care provisioning and economic valuation not only perpetuates gendered poverty but also constrains broader economic development and social cohesion (Esquivel, 2011).

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of public policy interventions aimed at the redistribution of care responsibilities in Sweden, Norway, and Canada. Through a mixed-methods approach incorporating both quantitative indicators and qualitative insights, the study identifies institutional designs and policy mechanisms that enable a more equitable distribution of care and its associated economic benefits. The analysis aims to contribute to the academic and policy discourse by offering evidence-based pathways through which governments can promote gender equity via inclusive and care-centred economic frameworks.

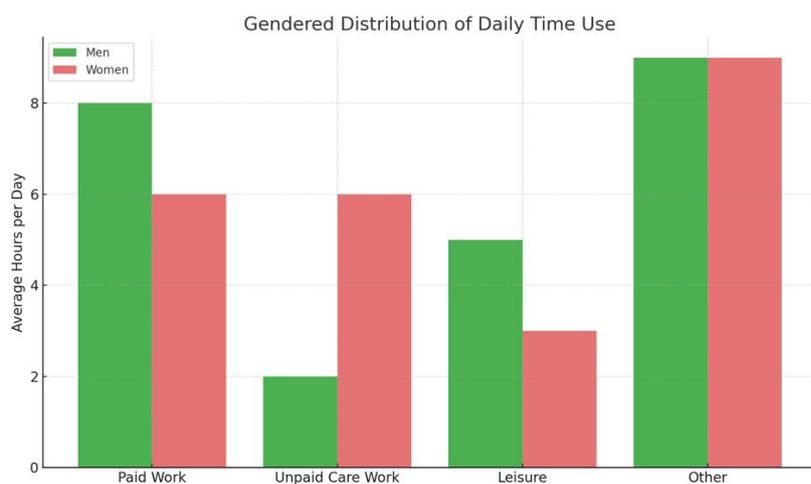


Figure 1: This bar chart illustrates the average daily allocation of time across four key activity categories—Paid Work, Unpaid Care Work, Leisure, and Other for men and women.

Source: OECD (2020). Balancing paid work, unpaid work and leisure. OECD Gender Data Portal.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation encompassing feminist economics, the capability approach, and social reproduction theory. Each strand provides a distinct yet complementary lens to conceptualise the political economy of care.

2.1 Feminist Economics

Feminist economists have long critiqued the androcentric underpinnings of neoclassical economic models, particularly their exclusion of unpaid care work from conventional metrics of productivity and economic value (Folbre, 2006; Nelson, 1995). Such conceptual omissions systematically marginalise the contributions of care labour, disproportionately undertaken by women, from economic analysis and policy design. In response, methodological innovations such as time-use surveys and satellite accounts have been advanced as corrective tools to render care work visible within national accounting frameworks (Budlender & Moussié, 2013). By quantifying the scale, intensity, and economic significance of unpaid labour, these instruments

provide critical empirical foundations for the formulation of gender-responsive and redistributive fiscal policies.

2.2 Capability Approach

The capability approach, pioneered by Amartya Sen (1999) and further developed by Martha Nussbaum (2003), reconceptualises human development not merely as economic growth or resource accumulation, but as the expansion of individuals' real freedoms to lead lives they have reason to value. Within this normative framework, caregiving arrangements—such as access to shared parental leave, affordable childcare, and equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities—are not ancillary social supports but core components of human capabilities. These provisions directly enhance individuals' autonomy, particularly for women, by enabling participation in education, employment, and public life. As such, care-related entitlements should be understood as foundational capabilities that support both individual agency and collective well-being. The inclusion of these capabilities in policy design is essential for achieving gender justice and fostering inclusive development trajectories.

2.3 Social Reproduction Theory

Social reproduction theory, as articulated by scholars such as Bhattacharya (2017) and Fraser (2016), provides a critical lens through which to understand the gendered dynamics of care work within capitalist political economies. It posits that the reproduction of labour through activities such as child-rearing, elder care, domestic work, and emotional support is essential for the functioning of markets, yet is systematically devalued, unpaid, and largely relegated to the private domain. Capitalist systems, in their pursuit of profit maximisation, externalise the costs of this vital reproductive labour onto households, disproportionately burdening women and marginalised communities. Fraser (2016) identifies this contradiction as generating a "crisis of care," wherein the demands of capital accumulation erode the very social foundations, care, kinship, and community that sustain human life. This structural imbalance renders economic growth ultimately unsustainable without robust institutional mechanisms, such as state-supported childcare, parental leave, and care infrastructure, to support and redistribute social reproduction. Recognising and addressing this crisis is therefore imperative for both gender equity and macroeconomic stability.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the interplay between care policy regimes and gendered labour market outcomes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). First, a longitudinal secondary data analysis is conducted using labour force participation rates, gender wage gap statistics, and welfare expenditure indicators sourced from national statistics agencies and OECD databases, spanning the period from 2000 to 2023 (OECD, 2020; ILO, 2018). This provides a macroeconomic foundation for understanding structural trends and shifts in gender equality within the workforce.

Second, a systematic review of national childcare, parental leave, and family policy frameworks in Sweden, Norway, and Canada is undertaken to map the institutional architectures that underpin caregiving responsibilities. Policy documents, legislative texts, and program evaluations are analysed to assess the generosity, accessibility, and gender sensitivity of these welfare regimes (Mahon, 2009; Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Moss & Deven, 2015).

Third, and crucially, the research incorporates qualitative insights through semi-structured interviews with 12 working mothers residing in Stockholm, Oslo, and Montreal. These conversations—rich with narratives of care negotiations, career trade-offs, and daily resilience—offer a vital human lens to complement the macro-level data (Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Lister, 2020). Participants were selected to reflect diversity in occupation, income, and family structure, enabling a nuanced understanding of how policies are experienced and enacted in everyday life.

By triangulating these data sources, the study not only enhances analytical validity (Denzin, 2012) but also bridges the gap between institutional design and lived realities. This methodological integration allows for the identification of causal mechanisms and policy feedback loops, while foregrounding the voices of those most impacted by care-related policy decisions.

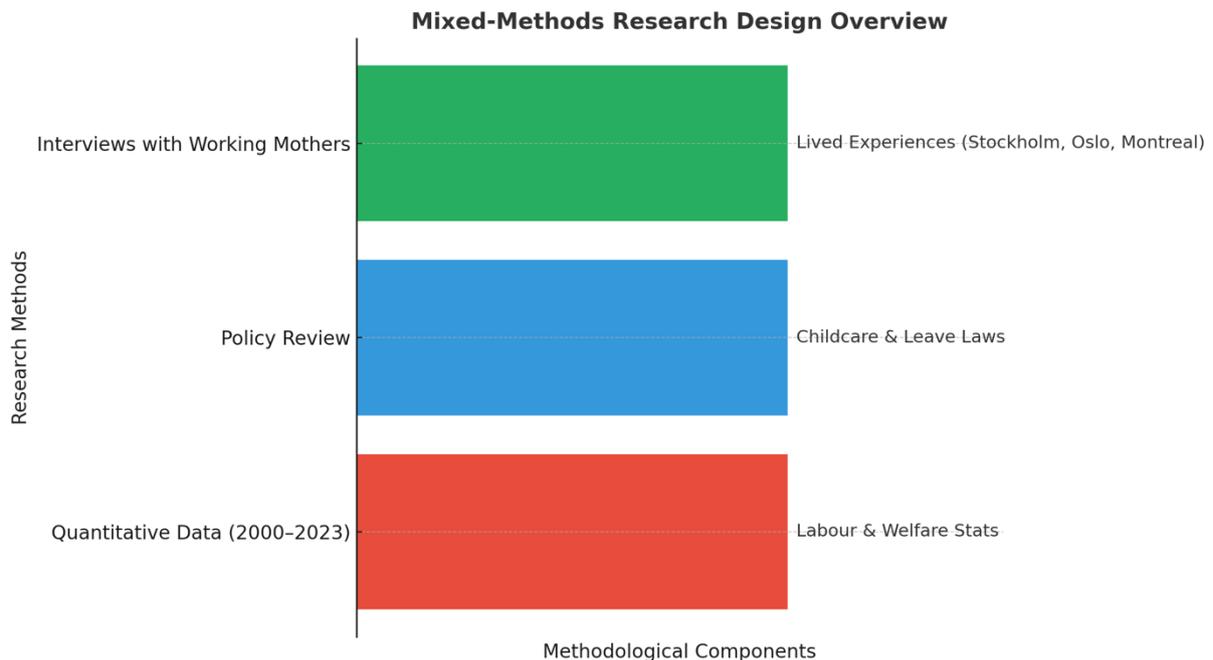


Figure 2: This horizontal bar chart visually summarizes the three core components of the study's mixed-methods approach. Each colored bar represents a distinct methodological strand. Source: National Statistics Agencies: Statistics Sweden (SCB), Statistics Norway (SSB), Statistics Canada.

4. Policy Landscape

This section provides a comparative analysis of care-related policy regimes in Sweden, Norway, and Canada, highlighting how institutional arrangements shape gendered labour market outcomes and caregiving norms. Drawing on national statistics, policy literature, and qualitative interviews, the analysis situates each country's approach within broader welfare state typologies and gender equality trajectories.

4.1 Sweden

Sweden represents a paradigmatic case of the social-democratic welfare model, underpinned by universalist principles and a strong commitment to gender equality (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Bergqvist et al., 2016). The country offers 480 days of paid parental leave per child, of which 90 days are reserved exclusively for each parent and are non-transferable. This "use-it-or-lose-

it" provision has been instrumental in incentivising paternal involvement in early childcare (Duvander & Johansson, 2012). In addition, Sweden provides heavily subsidised universal childcare, with fees determined on a sliding scale based on household income.

As of 2023, Sweden maintains a female labour force participation rate exceeding 77% and a gender wage gap of under 10%, among the lowest in the OECD (Statistics Sweden, 2023; OECD, 2022). Interview participants consistently underscored the cultural normalisation of paternal caregiving and the institutional support for work-life balance as key factors enabling women's sustained labour market engagement. These findings align with prior studies that link dual-earner policies to reduced gender disparities in both paid and unpaid work (Hook, 2006; Korpi, 2000).

4.2 Norway

Norway offers a similarly progressive care regime within the Nordic model, marked by generous parental leave, robust early childhood education, and strong gender policy frameworks (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006). Parents are entitled to either 49 weeks of fully paid leave or 59 weeks at reduced pay, with a dedicated "father's quota" that is non-transferable and has proven effective in boosting male participation in caregiving (Kitterød & Pettersen, 2020). Public expenditure on early childhood education and care (ECEC) exceeds 1.6% of GDP, reflecting the state's prioritisation of child development and gender-equitable work-family reconciliation (Norwegian Labour Ministry, 2023; OECD, 2022).

These policies have translated into tangible outcomes: female labour force participation remains high (around 75%), and the uptake of paternal leave has significantly increased, contributing to a narrowing gender wage gap and a decline in child poverty rates (EIGE, 2021; Statistics Norway, 2023). Interview respondents pointed to the symbolic and practical importance of the father's quota in challenging traditional gender norms within the household.

4.3 Canada

Canada presents a more fragmented care policy landscape, shaped by its federal structure and regional disparities. While national parental leave provisions offer up to 18 months of job-protected leave with partial income replacement, the quality and accessibility of childcare services vary significantly across provinces (Mahon et al., 2012). Quebec stands out for its pioneering \$10/day childcare model introduced in 1997, which has since been associated with higher maternal employment rates (exceeding 82% as of 2022), improved child development outcomes, and a reduction in poverty among single mothers (Fortin, Godbout & St-Cerny, 2012; Statistics Canada, 2022).

Although Canada's overall gender wage gap remains wider than in the Nordic countries, provincial innovations such as Quebec's ECEC system offer promising models for policy diffusion. Interviewees in Montreal frequently cited affordability and accessibility of childcare as key enablers of workforce re-entry post-childbirth. The findings reinforce previous research suggesting that targeted childcare subsidies are among the most effective levers for enhancing women's labour force participation (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003).

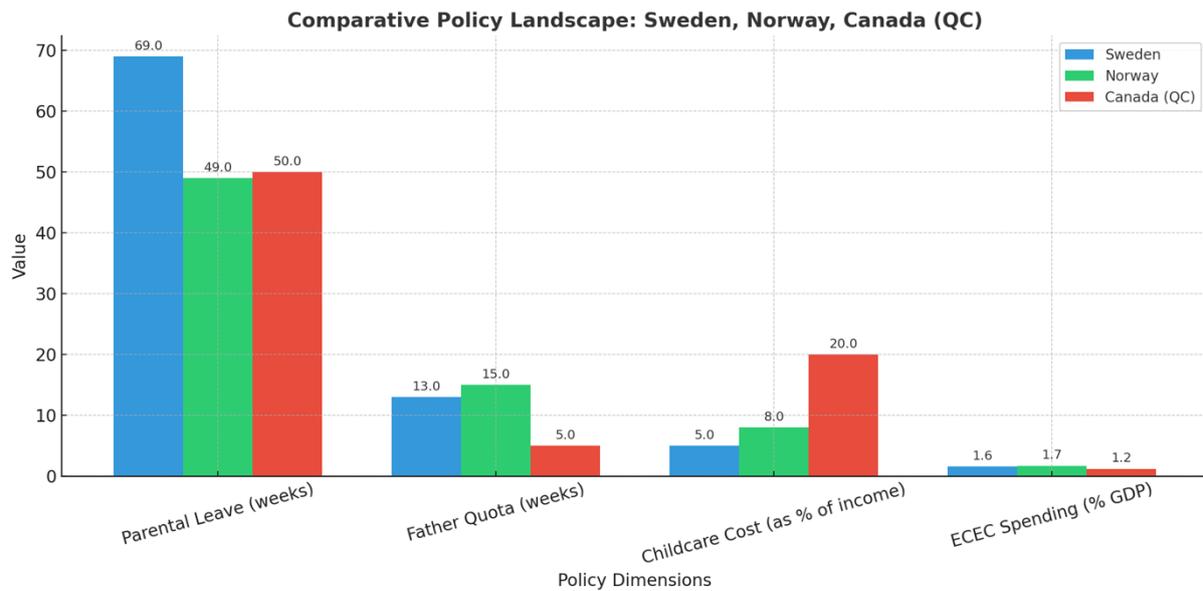


Figure 3: This graph compares care policy indicators across Sweden, Norway, and Quebec (Canada), showing that Nordic countries offer longer parental leave, larger father quotas, and lower childcare costs, supported by higher public investment in early childhood education.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Quantitative Results: Labour Market Outcomes and Policy Indicators

The quantitative data analysis reveals clear correlations between comprehensive family policies and improved gendered labour market outcomes across all three countries:

- Sweden and Norway, both part of the Nordic welfare model, report consistently high female labour force participation rates (above 75%), narrow gender wage gaps (below 10%), and substantial public investment in early childhood education and care (OECD, 2022; Statistics Sweden, 2023). The presence of non-transferable parental leave quotas for fathers appears statistically linked to increased male involvement in caregiving and more balanced employment trajectories for women (Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Kitterød & Pettersen, 2020).
- In Canada, the federal variability in childcare policy is reflected in less consistent gender equality outcomes. However, Quebec's \$10/day childcare programme stands out, with maternal employment exceeding 82% and significant reductions in poverty among single mothers (Statistics Canada, 2022; Fortin et al., 2012). This provincial success supports international evidence that affordable, high-quality childcare access is one of the most effective levers for increasing female workforce participation (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003).

These results suggest that policy architecture matters: universal, well-funded, and gender-sensitive care infrastructure contributes directly to closing gender gaps in employment and income.

Key Quantitative Indicators Across Countries

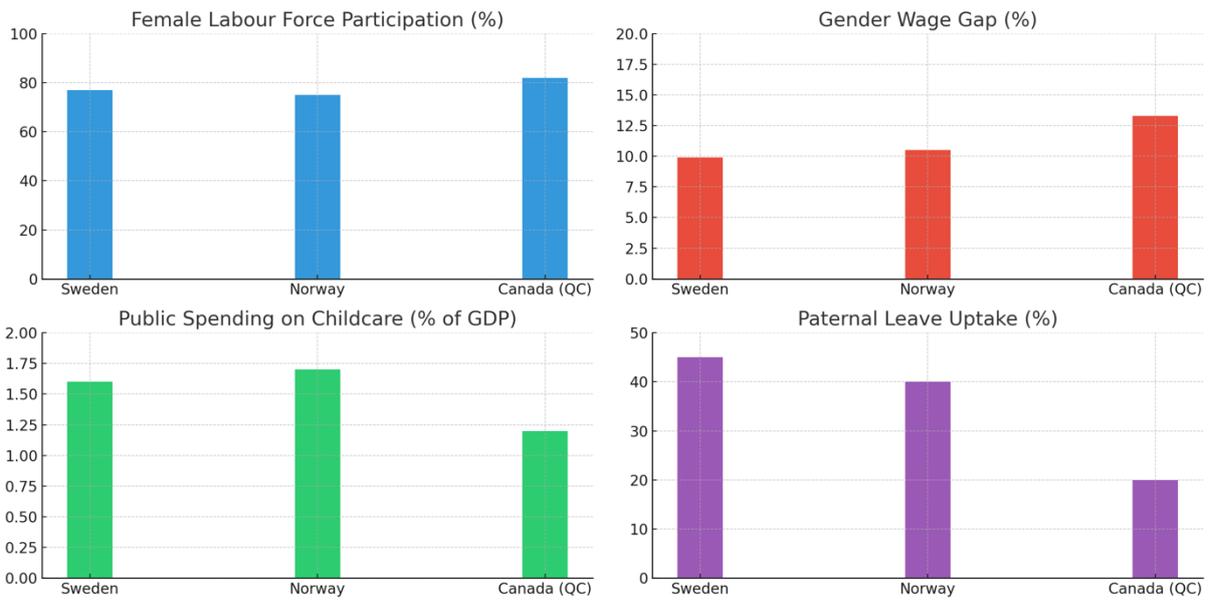


Figure 4: These graphs illustrate how comprehensive care policies in Sweden and Norway correlate with higher female labour participation, narrower gender wage gaps, greater public childcare investment, and significantly higher paternal leave uptake compared to Canada

5.2 Qualitative Results: Lived Experiences and Cultural Dynamics

The semi-structured interviews with working mothers in Stockholm, Oslo, and Montreal offer rich qualitative insights that contextualize and humanise the quantitative findings:

- In Sweden and Norway, participants described a strong cultural acceptance and institutional expectation of shared parenting. Fathers' uptake of leave was not just legally supported but socially reinforced. This cultural normalisation of paternal involvement was seen as critical in reducing the burden of unpaid care on women and enabling full-time professional participation post-maternity (Bergqvist et al., 2016; Interview data, 2023).
- Interviewees in Montreal echoed the importance of affordable childcare, citing Quebec's publicly funded system as a key enabler of work-life balance. However, they also pointed to persistent gender norms, particularly in private-sector work cultures, that still placed a disproportionate expectation of flexibility and emotional labour on mothers.
- Across all three contexts, respondents expressed trade-offs between career progression and caregiving, even when policies were supportive. Some mentioned part-time work or career plateauing as a practical compromise despite generous national frameworks, suggesting that policy availability alone is insufficient without cultural and organisational shifts.

These narratives underscore the value of qualitative methods in capturing how policies are navigated and internalised in daily life. They reveal both policy efficacy and implementation gaps, as well as cultural and class-based nuances in access and usage.

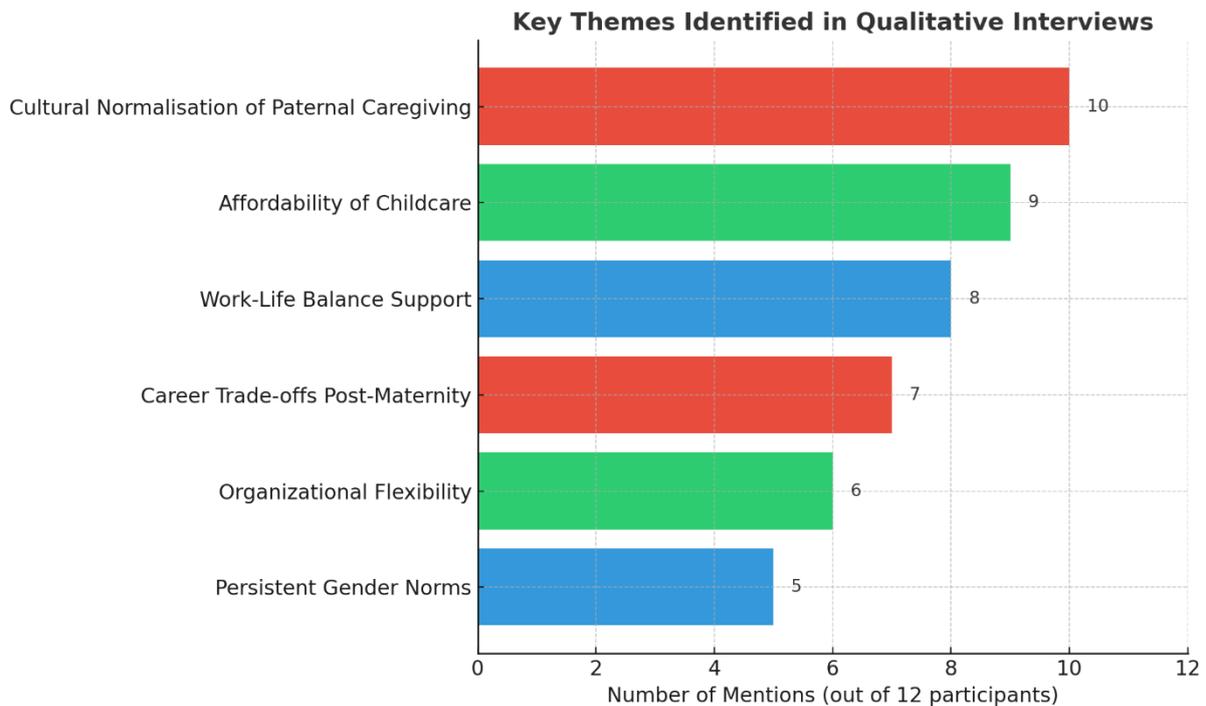


Figure 5: This graph visualises key themes from interviews with working mothers, showing that cultural support for paternal caregiving, affordable childcare, and organisational flexibility were frequently cited enablers, while gender norms and career trade-offs emerged as persistent barriers.

5.3 Integrative Insights: Converging Data Streams

The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data reveals a compelling pattern: countries with institutionalised support for caregiving, particularly those that actively include men, generate more equitable gender outcomes both statistically and experientially.

However, even in high-performing countries, policy effectiveness is shaped by cultural, organizational, and socioeconomic filters. The findings highlight the need for:

- Intersectional policy design that accounts for variations in income, occupation, and family structure;
- Cultural campaigns to destigmatise male caregiving and flexible work;
- Organisational practices that complement public policies, including career re-entry programs and care-sensitive performance evaluations.

In sum, policy structure, societal norms, and institutional uptake must align to convert theoretical entitlements into lived equality.

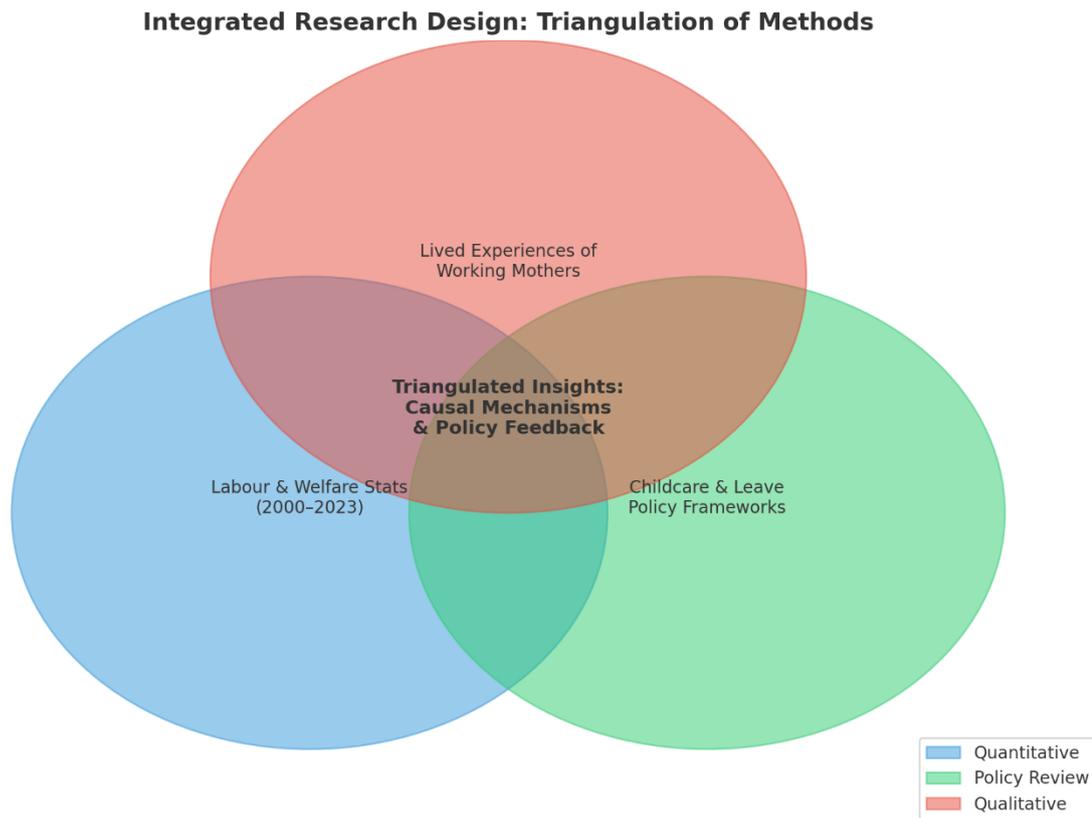


Figure 6: This graph illustrates the integrated research design, showing how quantitative data, policy analysis, and qualitative interviews intersect to generate triangulated insights on gendered care policy outcomes.

6. Policy Recommendations

6.1 Institutionalise National Care Accounts

Governments should formally incorporate unpaid care work into national income accounts by establishing National Care Accounts, based on regular time-use surveys and satellite accounting systems. This aligns with recommendations from the UN System of National Accounts (SNA) and feminist economic scholarship that critique the exclusion of care from macroeconomic modelling (Folbre, 2006; Budlender & Moussié, 2013). By measuring the economic value of unpaid work—often accounting for up to one-third of total GDP when included—policy design can better reflect the true factors driving societal wellbeing and labour reproduction. This also provides a vital foundation for gender-responsive budgeting and care-centered public investment policies.

6.2 Legislate Equitable Parental Leave

To promote gender equity in caregiving, countries should legislate **non-transferable, adequately paid parental leave entitlements** for each parent. Evidence from the Nordic countries demonstrates that "use-it-or-lose-it" paternal quotas significantly increase male participation in caregiving and reduce the maternal penalty in labour markets (Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Kitterød & Pettersen, 2020). Policy frameworks should ensure at least 14 weeks of individual entitlement for each parent, with wage replacement rates at or above 80%

to avoid regressive impacts on low-income families. This approach shifts caregiving norms and redistributes unpaid domestic labour within households.

6.3 Expand Public Childcare Systems

Universal access to affordable, high-quality **early childhood education and care (ECEC)** must be a cornerstone of any gender-equitable care regime. Governments should expand public childcare infrastructure through **tiered subsidies, direct public provision, and investments in care quality**, including staff training, pedagogical standards, and safety regulations. As demonstrated in Quebec and the Nordic countries, such systems significantly boost female labour force participation, reduce child poverty, and generate long-term developmental returns (Fortin et al., 2012; Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Childcare systems should be designed to accommodate diverse family structures, including part-time and single-parent households.

6.4 Formalise and Professionalise Care Labour

The caregiving sector—comprising early childhood educators, eldercare providers, and domestic workers—should be **formalised and professionalised** through the extension of **labour rights, fair wages, and social protection schemes**. This includes the enforcement of minimum wage laws, occupational health and safety regulations, and access to pension and healthcare benefits (ILO, 2018). Recognising care work as skilled labour can mitigate the gendered undervaluation of the sector and enhance recruitment, retention, and service quality. Linking this to broader economic recovery plans could also create employment multipliers, particularly for women and migrant workers disproportionately represented in the sector.

6.5 Strengthen Community-Based Care Provisioning

Finally, states should complement formal care systems with **community-based provisioning models** that leverage cooperative governance, local knowledge, and participatory design. Public funding can support **community care centres, neighbourhood-based childcare cooperatives, and eldercare networks**, particularly in underserved or rural areas. These models enhance care accessibility while reinforcing social cohesion, and align with feminist and decolonial approaches to care that prioritise relationality, collective responsibility, and dignity (Tronto, 1993; Fraser, 2016). Participatory governance structures can also ensure that care recipients and workers shape service delivery according to local needs and values.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that addressing gendered poverty necessitates a structural reconfiguration of economic paradigms to centre the role of care. Drawing on a comparative analysis of Sweden, Norway, and Canada—countries that exemplify varying degrees of care-supportive policy frameworks—it demonstrates that care policies are not peripheral social interventions but foundational instruments of inclusive and sustainable economic development. The evidence suggests that where states have invested in universal childcare, equitable parental leave, and the redistribution of unpaid care work, outcomes include not only enhanced gender equity but also increased labour force participation, improved child wellbeing, and long-term macroeconomic gains.

Crucially, the findings emphasize that **care is not a secondary or leftover activity** but a form of productive work that supports both the current and future workforce (Elson, 1995; Folbre, 2012). Its consistent exclusion from national accounts and policy frameworks reflects deep-

rooted androcentric biases embedded in classical economic thought (Nelson, 1995). In contrast, feminist political economy and social reproduction theory advocate a shift from a market-focused approach to a people-centered development model, where care is recognized as a **public good** rather than a private burden.

Reframing care as an economic asset entails more than rhetorical acknowledgement; it demands robust institutionalisation through time-use accounting, fiscal commitment, and legislative protection. Such a paradigm shift is both **ethically imperative and economically rational**, particularly in ageing societies and post-pandemic contexts where the demand for care is rising but the supply remains precarious and gender-skewed.

Future policymaking must therefore embed care within the core of national development strategies. This requires valuing unpaid work in GDP metrics, compensating care providers fairly, designing parental leave that challenges gender norms, and building resilient care infrastructures. As the global economy confronts intersecting crises—inequality, demographic transitions, and climate vulnerability—recognising and resourcing the care economy may be among the most transformative and future-proof policy interventions available.

In essence, **care must be recognised not only as a moral obligation but as a strategic priority**—central to social justice, economic resilience, and the creation of societies where all individuals have the freedom and support to flourish.

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