

RECOGNIZING THE INVISIBLE BACKBONE:

**INVESTING IN CARE FOR GENDER
EQUALITY AND INCLUSIVE
GROWTH**

By BRIGHT WEKESA



Every year, the International Day of Care and Support reminds us of an often-overlooked truth, that care work is the invisible backbone of our societies and economies. From nurturing children and supporting the elderly to caring for persons with disabilities and maintaining household wellbeing, care work sustains life and fuels productivity. Yet, much of this work remains undervalued, underpaid, or entirely unpaid, disproportionately borne by women and girls across the world.



At BRICS Insights, we recognize that addressing gender inequalities requires more than policy rhetoric, it demands the revaluation, redistribution, and recognition of care work as a pillar of social protection and inclusive economic growth.

THE GENDERED BURDEN OF CARE



Globally, women perform over three-quarters of unpaid care work, often at the expense of paid employment or education opportunities. This imbalance limits their economic participation, reinforces wage gaps, and perpetuates cycles of poverty and dependency, particularly for women in informal and rural economies.

In Kenya and across Africa, social norms and weak institutional support systems mean that care remains an individual responsibility rather than a collective or state-supported function. The result is a “care penalty” that undermines both gender equality and economic resilience.



SARAH LONGWE'S LEGACY: ADVANCING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EQUALITY

In reflecting on the struggle for gender equality in the care economy, we must acknowledge the seminal contributions of Sarah Hlupekile Longwe, a Zambian gender activist and scholar whose Women's Empowerment Framework has profoundly shaped gender analysis and development practice across Africa. Longwe's framework identifies five progressive levels of empowerment, welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control, offering a practical lens for assessing how development policies affect women's advancement. Her ideas challenge societies to move beyond providing welfare to women, to ensuring that women gain equal access, voice, and power in shaping the systems that govern their lives.



Applying Longwe's thinking to the care economy highlights the urgent need to:

- Shift from perceiving care as a private, welfare issue to recognizing it as a public, economic, and rights-based concern.
- Ensure equal access to social protection and care infrastructure.
- Foster conscientization — awareness that the unequal division of care is a structural barrier, not a natural one.
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CARE SYSTEMS AS SOCIAL PROTECTION



Care and support systems are not just about compassion; they are a form of social protection, a safety net that ensures human dignity, productivity, and wellbeing. By investing in care infrastructure, such as childcare centres, eldercare facilities, and community health systems, governments can create jobs, strengthen resilience among vulnerable populations, and drive inclusive growth.



BRICS INSIGHTS' PERSPECTIVE AND WORK

Through our research and policy engagement, BRICS Insights continues to highlight how gender-responsive social protection systems can unlock opportunities for women, youth, and marginalized groups. Our work emphasizes integrating care policies into national planning frameworks, ensuring that care work is not treated as an informal obligation but as a recognized and supported economic function.

We advocate for data-driven policy design that values care as a key investment in human capital, social cohesion, and economic transformation, aligning with the broader BRICS agenda for inclusive and sustainable development.



BRICS INSIGHTS' PERSPECTIVE AND WORK



As we mark this year's International Day of Care and Support, we are reminded of Sarah Longwe's call for true empowerment, where women gain both access and control over resources and decisions that shape their lives.

Reimagining our economies as caring economies means recognizing care work as essential infrastructure, not invisible labour. It means valuing the hands and hearts that sustain society, and building systems that share that responsibility fairly.

**INVESTING IN CARE IS INVESTING IN PEOPLE.
IT IS INVESTING IN A FUTURE WHERE NO
ONE, REGARDLESS OF GENDER OR
VULNERABILITY IS LEFT BEHIND.**



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