

How ‘The Motherload’ became shared language for recognising and reducing women’s unequal care

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Social norms change around care

What is The Motherload Project?

A participatory research project working with low-income mothers and fathers and partner organisations to make unequal care visible and translate lived realities into changes in norms, programmes and policy.

THE MOTHERLOAD; A DEFINITION

The Motherload is a concept that emerged from our work with mothers to name a missing perspective on care work. We define it as:

- Highly gendered care work
- Often invisible and undervalued
- Undertaken by people performing mothering
- Hinders economic security, safety and wellbeing
- Unequally distributed across society and between genders

Scaling The Motherload Concept

The project followed what co-researchers identified as important.

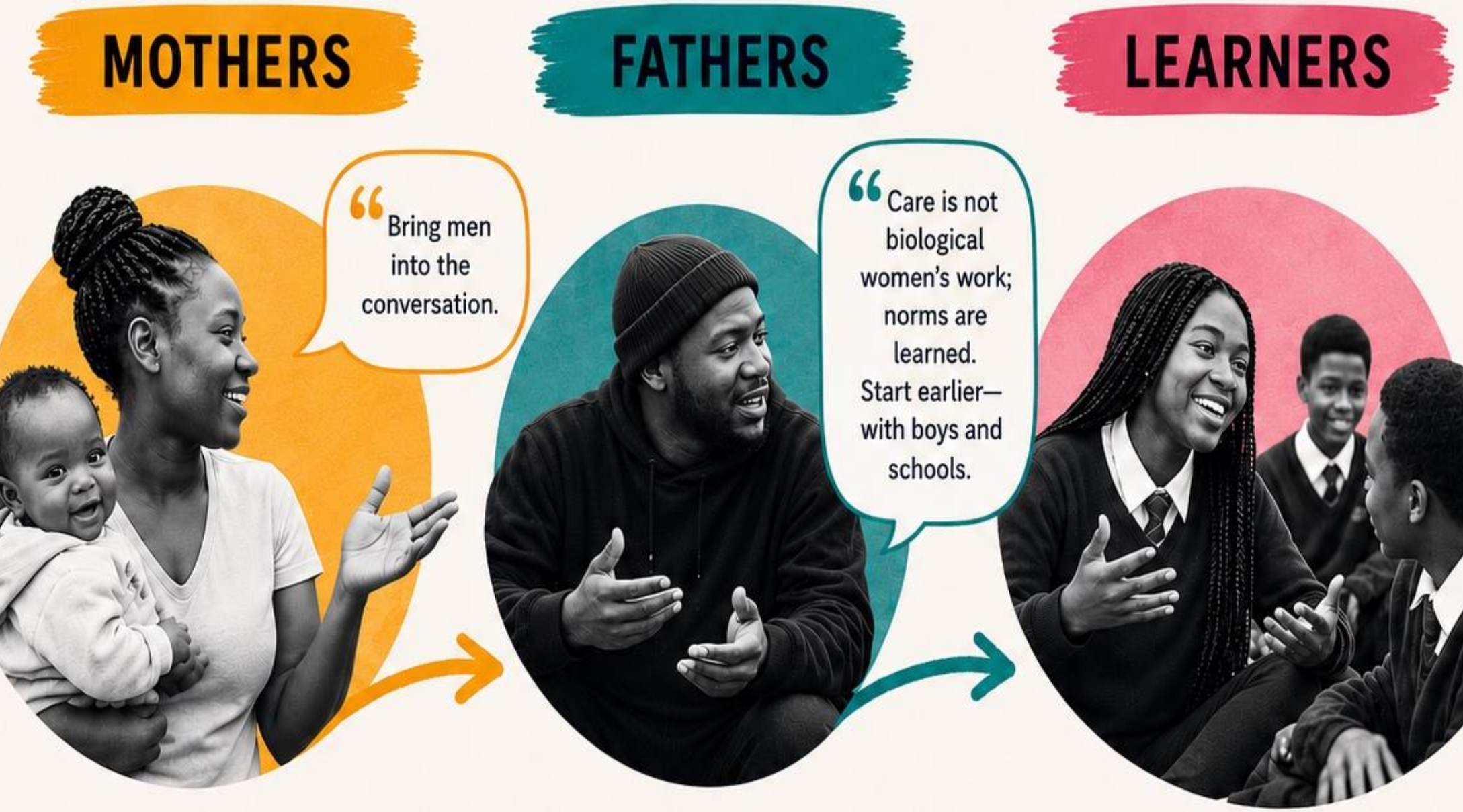
Work with mothers made the unequal and often invisible burden of care visible. From it, we generated the concept, “The Motherload.” Mothers called for fathers to be brought into the conversation.

Fathers began to question the idea that care is naturally women’s work and suggested early socialisation in schools as critical to changing norms.

Work with a **school support programme** allowed us to develop curricula and roll them out in Life Orientation sessions.

Feedback to **state and civil society policy-makers** helped centre the idea of reducing the motherload as a vital element in policy.

Naming The Motherload created a shared language for recognising invisible care, asking what produces it, and imagining how it might change — a language that has travelled from mothers to fathers, into programmes reaching mothers and young people, and into policy thinking and programme design.



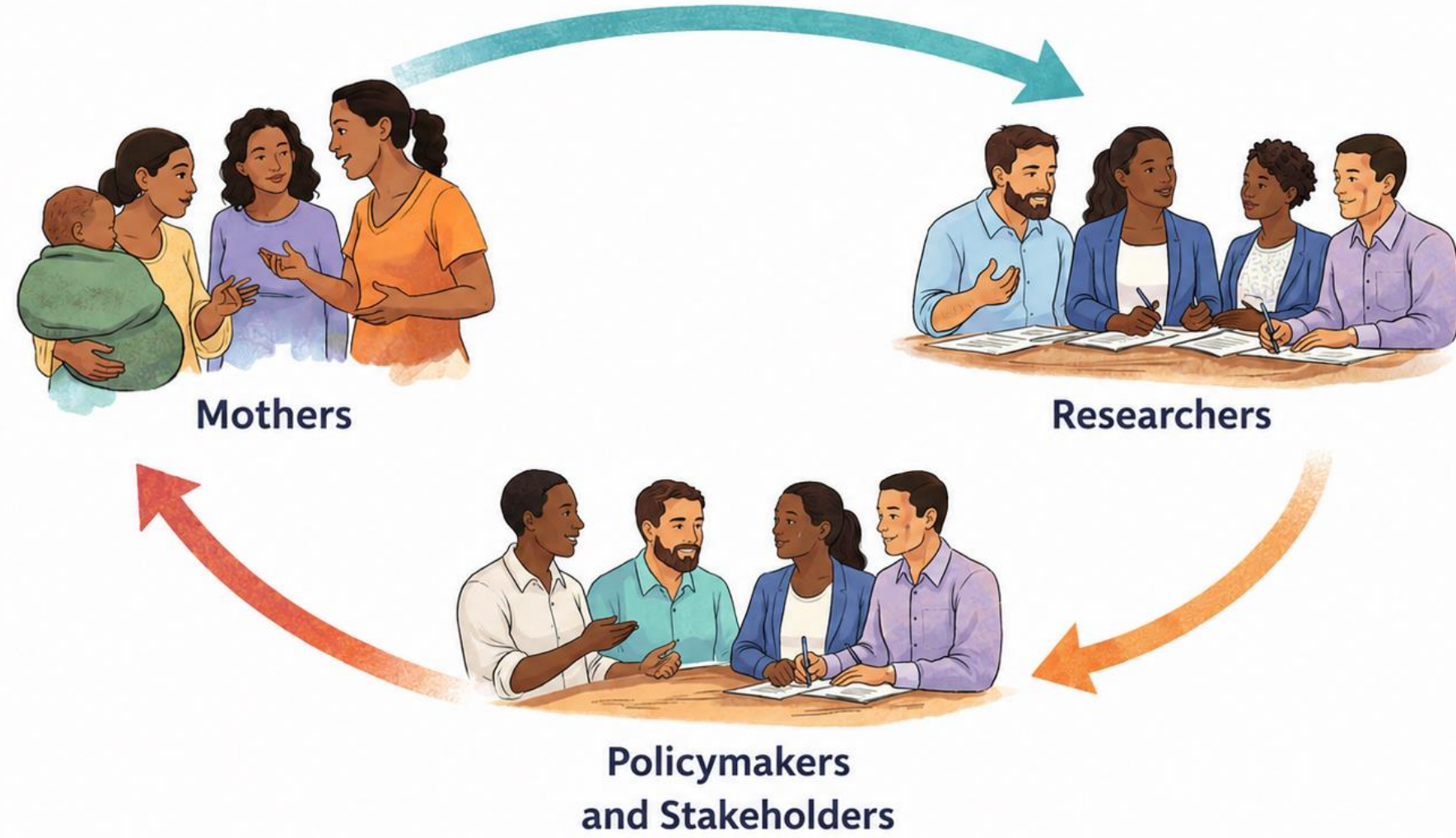
Methodology: Following Lived Experience

Participatory and iterative

Our feminist, decolonial and participatory methodology treats lived experience as expertise.

Mothers and fathers worked as co-researchers, generating and interpreting evidence, identifying priorities and shaping calls to action.

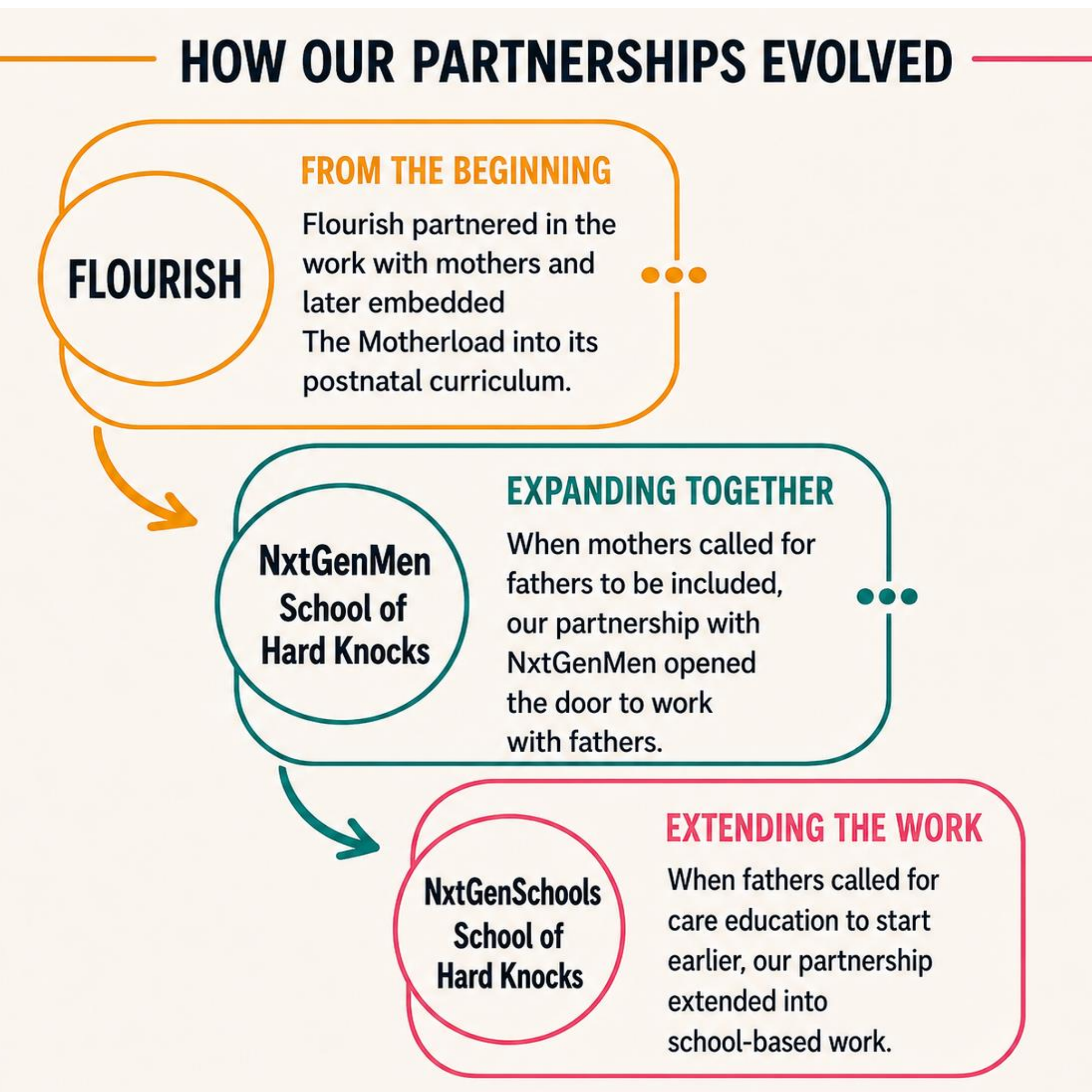
An **iterative process** kept those insights moving. Regular reflection with diverse stakeholders, feedback and co-design created opportunities to respond to what was emerging rather than separating research from action.



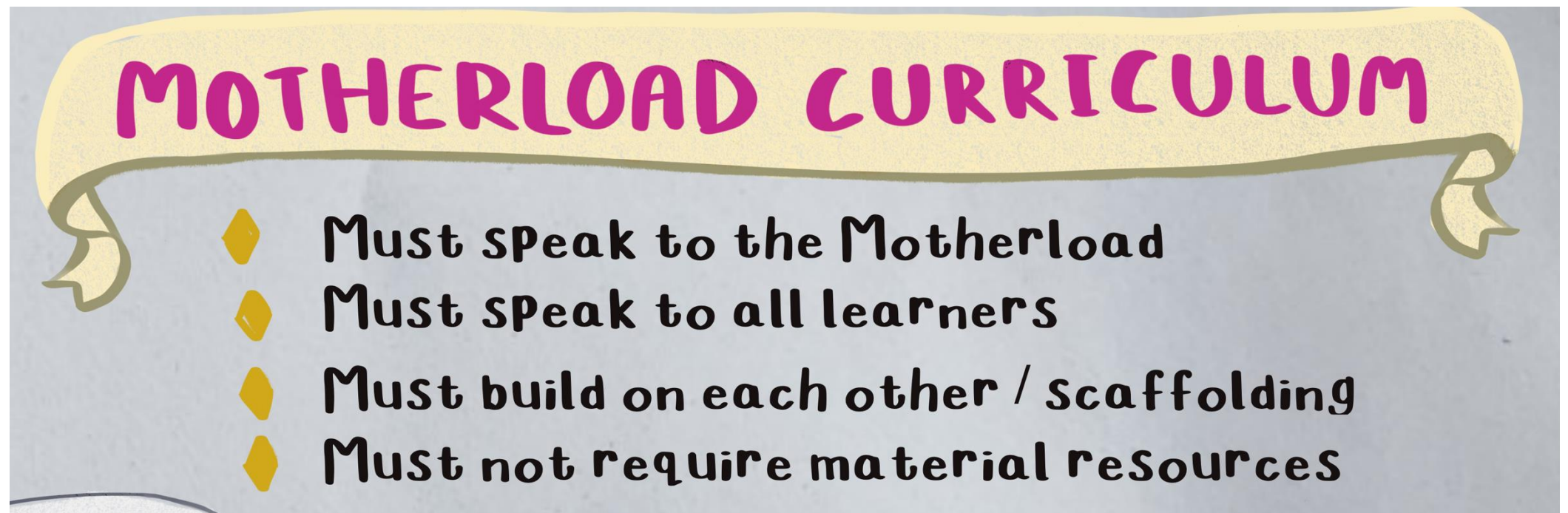
Iterative feedback loops connected mothers, researchers and policy stakeholders, allowing emerging insights to shape the work as it developed.

Partnerships as Pathways

We used longstanding relationships with **Flourish**, **School of Hard Knocks** and the **Western Cape Government’s Strategic Planning Unit** to create enduring partnerships that could evolve with the project.



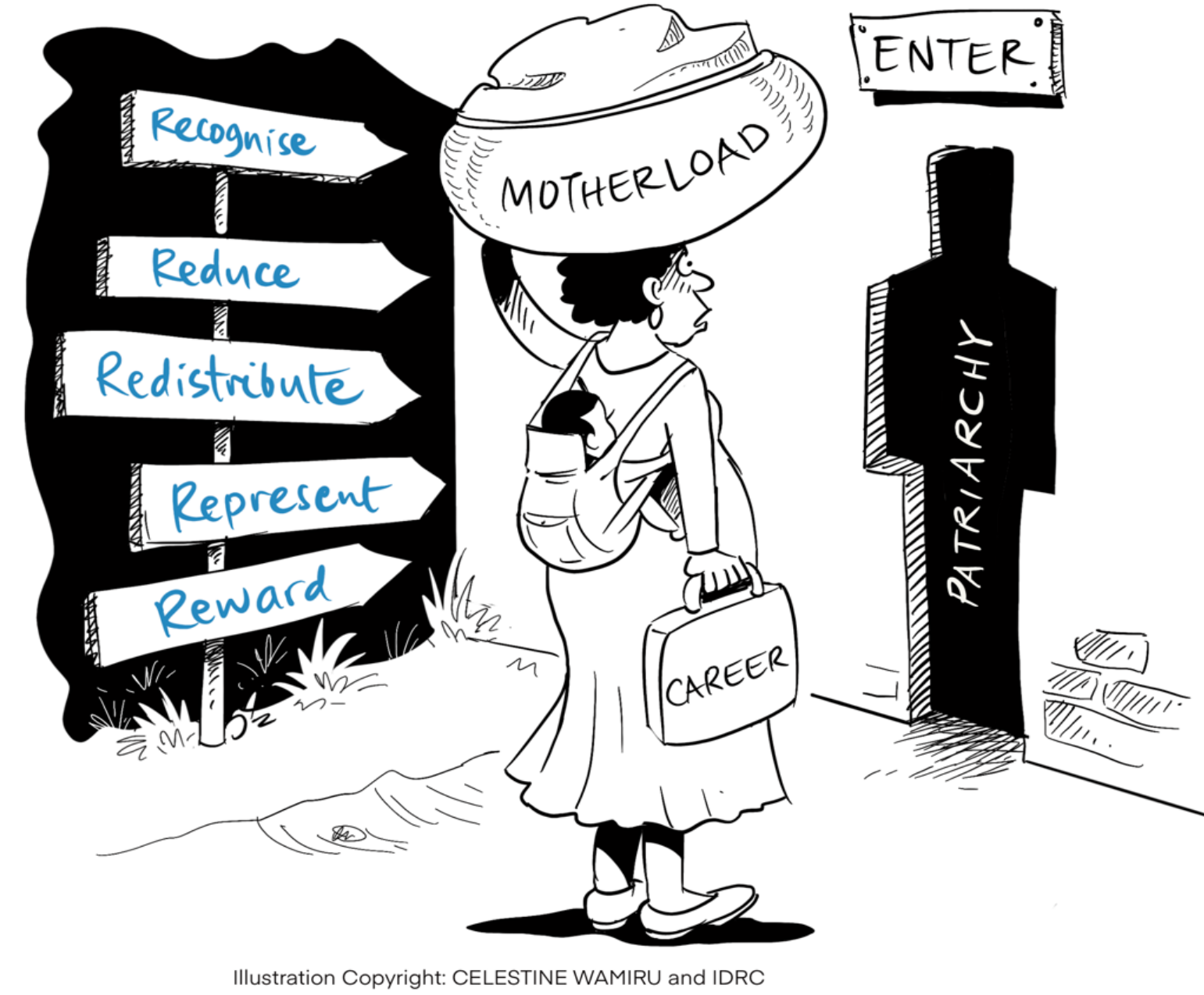
School of Hard Knocks curriculum co-design workshop: caregivers, coaches and researchers developing care-focused Life Orientation lessons.



Detail from a workshop illustration by visual scribe, Sydney Adams.

Key Lessons

Iterative, lived-experience research can create change at multiple levels simultaneously. Following co-researchers’ priorities opened new opportunities. Iterative feedback loops strengthened and consolidated existing partnerships. Rather than knowing every pathway in advance, the team remained responsive to where participants’ insights pointed next — allowing The Motherload to move into programmes, curricula and policy conversations.



“The distance between policy tables and kitchen tables is not simply geographical or institutional; it is emotional.”
— Tristan Görgens, Western Cape Government

Impact In Numbers

Embedding The Motherload in partner curricula is bringing conversations about unequal care to thousands of mothers, fathers, and young people - an important step towards shifting the norms that create and sustain The Motherload.

5,000+

Mothers reached through Flourish

150+

Flourish hosts and coaches trained

~1,000

Learners in six schools through SoHK

Take Home Points

- Giving invisible care a name — The Motherload — creates new opportunities for recognition, dialogue and change.
- Centring the knowledge of people most affected by an issue helps ensure that research leads to responses grounded in what they actually need.
- Care norms are learned across generations and institutions; shifting them means engaging women, men and young people.
- Effective partnerships are crucial to this work.



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