



**the  
motherload  
project.**



Project website

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# Centring Mothers' Lived Realities to Ground Care Economy Policy: A Contextualised, Collaborative Methodology from Africa

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In collaboration with



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# Background and Aims

## Context: Care, Inequality, and Policy

- Women spend around **3 times** as many hours as men on unpaid care work globally (UN Women, 2025).
- Unpaid care work, though often invisible, supports economies and is estimated to account for around **9% of GDP** (World Economic Forum, 2024).
- Women become **time-poor**, reducing their time for rest, education, or paid work, creating a barrier to gender equality (Oxfam, 2020).
- Investments in care **policies, infrastructure, and services** are critical to addressing these inequalities (ILO, 2024).

## 'The Motherload'

By centring **lived realities** to understand the full complexity of care work, we developed the concept *The Motherload*.

The Motherload highlights why care work requires urgent attention in policies focused on care-centred economies.

The Motherload describes the **highly gendered**, often-invisible, under-valued work individuals performing mothering undertake, which hinders their **economic security, safety, and wellbeing**.

### SHAPED BY

Historical & colonial legacies  
Institutional & infrastructural weakness  
Patriarchal systems & social processes

## Research Aims

- 01** To **bridge the disconnect** between policy design and lived experience through a **collaborative, contextually grounded** research process.
- 02** To contribute a **context-specific methodology** drawn from **African feminist, decolonial, and participatory** traditions, developed from within African contexts, for African settings and beyond.

# Methodology

## Methodological Approach

### African decolonial feminist epistemology

- Lived experience as knowledge

### Participatory action research (PAR)

- Photovoice as core method (data + advocacy)



### Timeline

Pilot phase (2023)  
Scaling phase (2024–2025)



### Participants

11 low-income mothers  
Positioned as co-researchers



### Participatory Processes

12 workshops  
2 photovoice exhibitions  
Stakeholder iterative feedback sessions

## Photovoice and Participatory Research

Mothers trained in photography to document everyday care work.

Captured:

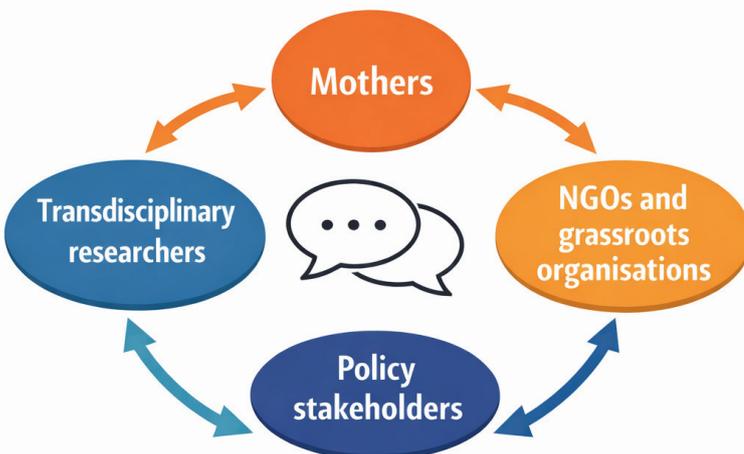
- **care burdens**
- **care strategies**
- **care impacts**

Generated visual and narrative evidence of their **multidimensional care labour** (emotional, physical, and cognitive), as well as its **causes** and **consequences**.



Participatory co-analysis workshop, positioning mothers as co-researchers rather than research subjects.

## Iterative Feedback Loops



Iterative feedback loops embedded across the research process.

## OUTCOMES

→ **Integrating community knowledge** into policy and programme processes, informing advocacy and intervention design.

→ **Real-time adaptation**, enabling responsive, bottom-up governance.

# Results

## Key Findings

### 1. Fragmented care systems

- Public services are siloed, poorly integrated and difficult to access.
- Mothers shoulder the administrative and emotional labour of navigating multiple systems.

### 2. Gender-blind public infrastructure

- Transport, sanitation, and public services are not designed with caregiving realities in mind.
- Infrastructure failures intensify everyday care work.

### 3. Systematic devaluation of unpaid care work

- Unpaid care work remains largely invisible in policy and economic planning.
- Care is naturalised as women's responsibility rather than recognised as social infrastructure.

### 4. Labour markets misaligned with caregiving realities

- Paid work arrangements fail to account for care responsibilities.
- This limits mothers' economic security and participation.



*Sharing The Motherload photovoice exhibition at the Iziko Gallery Annexe, centring mothers' photographs documenting lived experiences of care work in South Africa.*

# Impact

## Policy Impact: Western Cape Government (WCG)

### Jobs and Economic Design

- Recognition of low-paid, short-term jobs as gendered debt traps.
- Review of job design to account for:
  - childcare responsibilities
  - transport costs.

### Health and Nutrition Response

- Reframed malnutrition as a care and systems issue.
- Piloting of **Khulisa Care**.

### Longer-Term Impact Pathways

- Improved infant health supports short-term employability.
- Reduced childhood stunting and obesity strengthen long-term employment potential.

### Policy and Strategic Shifts

- Shift from cash transfers towards investment in care infrastructure.
- Adoption of multi-level interventions addressing household and community realities.
- Care reframed as essential infrastructure for gender equality and financial inclusion.

### Systems Integration and Advocacy

- Revealed fragmented services and gender-blind policy design.
- Informed:
  - greater interdepartmental coordination
  - national-level advocacy
  - gender-sensitive strategic planning

## Programmatic Impact: Community Partner (Flourish)

### Programme Design and Access

- User fees removed from antenatal and postnatal groups.
- Participation increased: ~11,000 (2023) → ~**18,000 mothers** (2024).
- Programme hosts now paid directly through external funding.

### Systems & Funding Engagement

- Informed advocacy for funding reform in social enterprise models.
- Reframed mothers as workers, not only beneficiaries.
- Shaped engagement with
  - private sector funders
  - social employment initiatives.

### Economic Empowerment Pathways

- Increased earning potential for hosts.
- Programme growth led to:
  - more graduates
  - more potential hosts
  - clearer career pathways and promotion opportunities.

### Training & Ideological Shifts

- The Motherload integrated into: curriculum, facilitator training, maternal mental health modules.
- Strengthened peer support and recognition of mothers' lived realities.
- Reach (Q1 2025)
  - 11 trainers; 120 programme hosts
  - **1,508 mothers**.

# Discussion and Conclusion

## What The Motherload Demonstrates

- **Person-centred, collaborative** research surfaces systemic **policy blind spots** in care provision.
- Centring low-income mothers' **lived realities** reveals care dimensions **overlooked** by technocratic policy models.
- Care is reframed as a **structural and political** concern, not a private issue.



## Methodological Insights



### Participatory, Person-Centred Knowledge Production

- Positions mothers as **knowledge holders**, not data sources.
- Uses arts-based, **culturally resonant methods** to make invisible care work visible.
- Translates lived care into **communicable evidence** across power and expertise divides.

### Iterative Feedback Loops

- Embeds **iterative dialogue** between mothers, researchers, and policy actors.
- Keeps research **responsive, accountable, and community-aligned**.
- Creates **pathways** for insights to inform **analysis, advocacy, and policy responses**.

## Broader Implications

- Offers a **replicable, context-grounded framework** for policy development from the African context.
- Demonstrates how **African feminist decolonial epistemologies** can inform transformative policy-making.
- Ensures those most affected by care policy are **included** in its design, not consulted after the fact.