



A synthesis of national research

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This research study across three countries – Kenya, UK, and Zimbabwe – was carried out to identify the dominant narratives that influence public perceptions of care and informal work. It enabled the researchers to develop and test new narratives that could be used to improve public attitudes towards care and informal work. Creating new stories about care and informal work is vital to securing adequate investment and support from communities, traditional leaders and governments.

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Globally, unpaid care, paid care work and informal work across many sectors is undervalued, underinvested in, unseen and taken for granted. It is not adequately supported by governments or societies more broadly. Despite the great social and economic contribution of this unpaid, underpaid and informal work, existing public and institutional narratives currently dismiss care, and much of the work undertaken by women more widely, as a low-skilled activity of little or no social and economic worth. This has a negative impact on the lives of the people who carry it out – primarily women and girls – and those who benefit from it the most.

To change this, we need to tell new stories about care (unpaid and underpaid) and informal work – stories that value this work as a vital part of society and the economy, a collective good that must be adequately invested in and supported by communities, traditional leaders and governments.

As part of the ‘Reframing Narratives on Care and Informal Work’ project (from January 2022 to July 2023), Oxfam worked with researchers in Kenya (Busara Center for Behavioural Economics), the UK (The Answer) and Zimbabwe (Grace Ruvimbo Chirenje), in close collaboration with international and local organizations in each country, to develop new narratives on care and informal work. These narratives were tested against their ability to effectively communicate the vital importance of paid and unpaid care, domestic work and informal work to the general public and key audiences; in particular, the urgent need to value it properly – setting the scene for specific calls to action for policy change.

Due to the distinct social, cultural and political contexts prevalent in the three countries, there was a slightly different focus in each. In **Kenya**, the research focused on unpaid care and domestic work, encompassing all unpaid services provided within a household for its members, including care of people, housework, and voluntary community work, and paid domestic work – performed for private households in exchange for monetary compensation. In the **UK**, the project used a broad definition of paid and unpaid care work, including caring for children as parents and guardians, paid social care and childcare work, and providing unpaid care for others with additional support needs due to illness, disability or old age. In **Zimbabwe**, the focus was on unpaid care and domestic work and informal work, which included street vending and trading.

In **Kenya**, five narrative concepts were identified that had the potential to positively reframe perceptions of unpaid care and domestic work:

1. The contributions domestic workers make to Kenyan households and the importance of earning a basic income for their survival.
2. The diverse skill set required for performing care and domestic work.
3. The unbalanced workload of women's ‘double shift’ – balancing unpaid domestic work with paid work, and the redistribution of care and domestic work within households.
4. The significance of care and domestic work through its direct impact on the economy.
5. A narrative that encouraged fathers to engage in unpaid care and domestic work to foster a better relationship with their children, expressed through a vignette featuring ‘John’, a fictional father.

The findings demonstrated that a new narrative is capable of positively influencing research participants’ beliefs, regardless of the message frame of the counter-narrative. They also indicate that a comprehensive mixed-narrative strategy integrating so-called ‘gain, nudge, and loss narratives’ should be adopted in future efforts to shift perceptions.

In the **UK**, the research focused on paid and unpaid care, with a nationally representative sampling design. A single narrative, in which care was broadly framed as a collective activity that holds society together, was identified as having the greatest potential to change perceptions of care.

This performed well in shifting how care was prioritized by the UK public as an issue for politicians to address. It also provided the basis for a series of recommendations:

- Lead with the idea that caring is a collective activity that holds society together and contributes significantly to the wellbeing of the nations. This can shift people's perceptions of care.
- Frame carers as part of a network across the UK to help people see care as more of a 'system' or 'safety net for society'.
- Talk about the enormous number of people from diverse backgrounds who carry out caring activities.
- Remind audiences about the scope of caring – from caring for the youngest people (children) to the oldest (aged 90 and above), and everyone in between.
- Emphasize the emotional benefits that carers bring – human warmth, independence and dignity.
- Highlight the negative consequences for society, carers and recipients of care if caring does not receive better support.

In **Zimbabwe**, the research focused on unpaid care and informal work (in particular, street vending), and on audiences from the media, informal workers, and religious and traditional leaders. Four reframed narratives were identified that have the potential to change perceptions of unpaid care and domestic work/informal work:

1. Engaging in unpaid care and domestic work can improve the relationship between fathers and their children.
2. Men and boys supporting unpaid care and domestic work can lead to happier relationships and homes.
3. Men and women are equally capable of performing domestic and professional duties.
4. Unpaid care and domestic work are crucial factors driving economic development.

The key findings that emerged from testing the new narrative suggested:

- It is important to highlight the collective benefits of care for society to change people's perceptions of unpaid care and domestic work/informal work.
- This can be achieved by emphasizing that caring is a collective activity that holds society together and contributes significantly to the wellbeing of the nation.
- It is important to frame unpaid care and domestic work as part of the economy, with a special emphasis on informal work, to make caregivers more visible and highlight their contribution to the economy.
- The emotional benefits that caregivers bring should be emphasized, along with the more functional and financial aspects.
- By highlighting negative consequences for society if care is undervalued, caregivers and recipients of care generate a sense of urgency in tackling the undervaluation of unpaid care and domestic work.

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