



ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN UKRAINE

Executive summary

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Context and purpose

Ukraine is enduring a full-scale war that has deepened a socioeconomic crisis and put a spotlight on a critical question: **How can mothers of young children engage in paid work while their children receive proper care?** The war has greatly exacerbated a longstanding childcare shortage, as many preschools have closed or been repurposed as shelters for safety. Even before the full-scale war, affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services were limited; today, the gap is critical.

However, this is not the only constraint. Women with children face multiple, interconnected barriers across childcare availability, labour market conditions, social protection design and social norms. The study confirms that improving childcare alone, without addressing these broader structural and institutional factors, will have limited impact on women's economic empowerment.

In effect, many women with infants and pre-school-aged children are kept out of the workforce not by choice, but by circumstance. This situation undermines women's right to decent work and children's right to care, and it poses a serious challenge to Ukraine's recovery and development.

The purpose of the study is to examine barriers and identify effective, evidence-based pathways to expand opportunities for women with children under the age of 7 to participate in the labour market without compromising the care and development of their children.

It is grounded in a rights-based and gender-responsive approach, recognising that enabling women's economic empowerment and redistributing unpaid caregiving are both economic priorities and state obligations under international and EU-aligned commitments.

The study adopts an intersectional lens, recognising that women with young children are not a homogeneous group. Barriers differ across income levels, rural and urban locations, displacement status, family structure, and disability. Effective solutions must therefore be targeted and inclusive, ensuring that no group is left behind.

By investigating the connections between childcare, social norms, family economics, social protection and employment, the study aims to inform advocacy, reform dialogue and decision-making on how to build a more family-friendly and gender-equal Ukraine. In the context of wartime recovery and EU accession, investing in care systems emerges as both an urgent necessity and a strategic economic investment.

Methodology overview

To provide a comprehensive evidence base, the study employed a mixed-methods research design that captured both broad trends and personal experiences. A nationally representative survey of 3,639 parents and carers of children under seven was conducted across all regions of Ukraine under government control. The household survey fieldwork was conducted from August through September 2025, and it also included comparative groups, in particular mothers of children aged 7–9, women expecting or planning a child and caregiving grandparents. This quantitative survey provides statistical insights into mothers' employment status, childcare access, and related economic conditions.

In parallel, qualitative research was carried out, including focus group discussions with mothers, fathers, and other carers, and in-depth interviews with employers, government officials and experts. These qualitative components captured nuanced perspectives on cultural norms, workplace practices and daily caregiving realities behind the numbers. Research activities were adjusted to the realities of the war: data collection included internally displaced families and used remote methods where necessary, all while adhering to UNICEF and ILO ethical standards. By triangulating quantitative data with personal testimonies, the study builds a reliable and rich picture of the challenges and opportunities for women's economic empowerment in Ukraine's current context.

Chapter 1

Policy context for women's economic empowerment

Global standards and national commitments form a crucial backdrop. Ukraine has ratified or aligned with numerous international and EU frameworks that uphold the right to work and support rights related to care.

These include United Nations conventions on women's rights and children's rights and International Labour Standards that oblige States to support working parents (for example, by ensuring access to maternity protection and childcare), as well as the Sustainable Development Goals which link gender equality with the availability of childcare. As a candidate for EU membership, Ukraine is also expected to meet European Union directives and benchmarks, notably the EU Work-Life Balance Directive and the Barcelona targets on ECEC coverage, which set standards for parental leave, work-family balance and childcare accessibility.

Domestically, the government has reflected these norms in its strategies, such as the State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men (2022–2030) and the Strategy for Closing the Gender Pay Gap (2023–2030), which prioritise expanding childcare services and enabling women's full participation in the economy.

However, gaps remain between policy and practice. **Ukraine's legal framework has historically provided generous parental leave** – up to three years per child with job protection, which affirms the importance of care, but has also contributed to very long career breaks for mothers. In practice, many women stay on extended unpaid leave because affordable and quality daycare is unavailable or because social expectations pressure them to remain at home. Fathers, by contrast, rarely take parental leave, reflecting gender norms not yet fully addressed by policy.

The lack of public ECEC options, combined with insufficient incentives for shared parental responsibilities, has meant that **formal commitments have not translated into equality on the ground**. Strengthening the policy framework, by aligning laws with international standards (e.g., ILO Conventions No. 156 and No. 183) and enforcing non-discrimination and work-life balance measures, is recognised as a pathway to change. The report also points to the need to link leave policy with an ECEC entitlement from the end of leave, so that returning to work is feasible in practice, not only in law.

In summary, Chapter 1 highlights that Ukraine's existing commitments strongly endorse improving access to ECEC and promoting women's employment; the task ahead is to implement and fund these commitments in ways that actively redistribute care responsibilities and uphold women's economic rights.

Chapter 2

Economic situation of families and mothers' employment

The economic conditions of households with young children and the structure of the labour market affect mothers' employment. The findings reveal a cycle of constrained choices and financial strain.

Employment and inactivity vary strongly by the age of the child. Overall, **only 35 per cent of mothers with children aged 0–6 are employed**, meaning nearly two thirds are economically inactive. Employment is especially low among mothers of children aged 0–2. Only 13 per cent are employed, while 85 per cent are economically inactive. Among mothers of children aged 3–6, employment rises to 54 per cent, while 43 per cent remain economically inactive. Fathers' outcomes differ sharply. **Among fathers of children aged 0–6, 94 per cent are employed**, and only about 3 per cent are unemployed or economically inactive.

The data also show a significant untapped labour reserve. Among economically inactive mothers of children aged 0–6, about 28 per cent report that they want to work but have not reached the job search stage. This indicates that the **employment gap does not stem from a lack of education, skills, or ambition among women**. Instead, it reflects structural barriers discussed throughout the report that prevent many mothers from transitioning from care-related inactivity to active job search. Almost all mothers who actively sought work were able to find a job, and only 2 per cent of jobseekers remained unemployed. This suggests that the binding constraints arise earlier, at the stage of entering the labour market rather than in securing employment. When childcare is available and supportive policies are in place, mothers are eager to work.

For now, **families with young children face serious financial vulnerability when mothers cannot work**. Families with children rely heavily on wages, while households without children have more diversified income sources. About 72 per cent of income for families with young children comes from salaries, compared to around 54 per cent for households without children. This means that if a mother is

forced to stop working, the family loses a large share of income. The study also finds very limited financial buffers. In 2023, only 1 per cent of families with young children had savings sufficient to cover one year of basic needs, while about 15 per cent had savings that would last less than one month. Nearly one in five families with children under seven carried debts.

Poverty has risen sharply. Experts estimate that **child poverty rose** from 43 per cent in 2021 to 65 per cent in 2022. Many families can no longer afford necessities or early education activities for their children. **Single-mother households are especially hard hit**. The report finds that 48 per cent of them have monthly incomes below UAH 15,000 (roughly USD 360), compared to 14 per cent among two-parent families. With limited savings and scarce social support, these families are at high risk of hardship when mothers have no earnings. This economic pressure interacts with childcare constraints and workplace conditions, locking many mothers out of paid work.

Workplace factors compound the issue. **Flexible working arrangements and employer-supported childcare remain limited**. Discrimination and bias also shape decisions. Thus, 61 per cent of women consider prejudice against hiring mothers of young children to be very widespread. Mothers also report that hiring refusals are often attributed to having a small child. In the survey, 74 per cent of mothers of children aged 3–6 who reported hiring refusals cited the presence of a small child as the reason given by employers. Such bias, along with the lack of family-friendly workplace practices, discourage or disadvantage mothers seeking jobs.

The findings also highlight the importance of aligning social protection with childcare provision. Evidence shows that cash transfers can reduce poverty and support caregiving, but without accessible childcare they may unintentionally reinforce women's economic inactivity. Integrated systems that combine income support with accessible services are more effective in enabling mothers to return to work.

In summary, Chapter 2 paints a picture of economic pressure and systemic barriers. Without accessible childcare and supportive employers, many mothers are effectively locked out of paid work, to the detriment of their families' income security and the country's economy.

Chapter 3

Social norms and family dynamics

Social norms, gender roles, and family dynamics strongly shape women's economic opportunities. The research finds that entrenched expectations about motherhood and fatherhood influence individual decisions and reinforce structural barriers.

Norms that frame childcare and domestic work as women's responsibility place strong pressure on mothers and discourage fathers' involvement. In the survey, 69 per cent of out-of-work mothers of infants reported that the **belief that a mother must devote herself fully to childcare was a main reason they were not looking for a job**. Among women with children aged 3–6, this share was 47 per cent.

Mothers report feelings of guilt or fear of social disapproval if they return to work while their children are still small. Fathers and community members often reinforce these expectations. **More than half of men surveyed agreed that women should not work outside the home when children are young**, while 18 per cent of men stated directly that they do not want a woman to be employed.

These norms have tangible effects. Women face a double responsibility when they work and still carry most caregiving. This overload reduces well-being and limits career progression. Survey findings show that only 10 per cent of women's time is available for rest, and around **18 per cent of women report having no time for rest at all**. This constant overload leads to stress and burnout, further affecting women's health and career longevity.

Meanwhile, traditional notions of masculinity can deter fathers from taking on more caregiving. Activities like taking parental leave or even doing daily daycare drop-offs are sometimes viewed as "unmanly," creating stigma for fathers who might otherwise be willing to share care responsibilities.

Care is often redistributed not to fathers or ECEC services, but to extended family, especially grandmothers. A large share of families relies on grandparents frequently, and most families with children under two use no external childcare at all, reflecting limited availability, affordability, and trust in services.

While norms remain restrictive, the study finds **growing openness among parents to more equal sharing of care**. This creates a window for policy and behavioural interventions to shift norms in practice, especially when supported by enabling services and workplace policies.

In summary, Chapter 3 concludes that while traditional social norms remain a fundamental barrier underpinning women's unequal share of caregiving responsibilities and limited employment, there is momentum for change. By promoting and normalising shared caregiving, through gender-responsive family-friendly policies, public campaigns, and positive role models, Ukraine can begin to reshape family dynamics so that both women and men can balance work and care more equally.

Chapter 4

Early childhood education and care services

The availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of ECEC services are central to enabling parents, especially mothers, to participate in the workforce. The study finds that ECEC services remain insufficient and uneven, with war-related constraints adding layers of disruption.

Security and shelters shape whether ECEC services can operate in person. In January 2023, about half of preschools operated remotely or in a mixed format. By April 2025, this declined to 9 per cent operating remotely and 13 per cent in a mixed format. In Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts, all preschools operate remotely but restoration continues. By early 2025, 565 kindergartens had been repaired and 293 shelters constructed or equipped, while major shelter needs remain.

Access varies by geography and displacement patterns. While overall capacity pressures in some cities eased due to demographic decline, **overcrowding persists in large cities, western regions and some rural areas.** The highest reported overcrowding in urban kindergartens is in Ivano-Frankivsk region at 110 children per 100 places. Waiting lists remain a marker of unmet demand. In 2023, 19.5 per cent of children aged 3 to 5 were on waiting lists for ECEC admission. For parents of children with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN), **finding suitable inclusive ECEC services is even more challenging,** as specialized support and accessible facilities are limited.

A core gap is the **severe shortage of services for children under three,** which directly delays mothers' return to work. Only one in seven places in urban ECEC facilities and one in ten in rural facilities is available for children under three. Of 986,000 places in 2024, only 152,000 were for children under three. Coverage is low by European standards. Before the full-scale invasion, coverage for children under three remained around 18 per cent, while overall ECEC coverage in 2024 was 73 per cent.

While affordability remains a consideration for many families, particularly in situations where public childcare options are limited, recent legislative changes have expanded access to financial support. Subsidy schemes such as eYasla (effective from 2026), and eSadok (effective from 2028), are now in place to support childcare needs for parents in full-time formal employment.

Access to ECEC is also influenced by factors beyond availability and cost. **Some parents encounter challenges related to limited information about available services,** and administrative procedures that would require a support to navigating the system of existing financial support.

The report shows that **these constraints are even more acute for vulnerable groups,** including low-income families, single parents, displaced families, and families raising children with disabilities or special educational needs. For children with disabilities or SEN, barriers are particularly severe and include limited accessible infrastructure, insufficient specialized staff, and concerns about stigma, exclusion, and the quality of support. Ensuring inclusive, respectful, and high-quality services is critical not only for access, but also for building families' trust in the system.

In summary, Chapter 4 highlights that without significant improvements in the ECEC system, including ensuring safety in wartime, rebuilding and expanding infrastructure, and reducing costs, the ECEC sector will continue to fall short of its vital role. That role is not only to educate and nurture young children, but also to enable parents, mothers in particular, to exercise their right to work and provide for their families.

Integrated analysis

Bringing together the findings, the study confirms that women's economic exclusion during early childrearing is driven by a system of interdependent constraints. Childcare gaps, affordability barriers, long leave design, limited workplace flexibility, discrimination, weak service navigation and entrenched gender norms reinforce each other. Addressing any single constraint in isolation will not be sufficient.

The stakes of inaction are high. **Ukraine risks deeper labour shortages and slower recovery** if a large share of mothers remain outside the labour market. Household poverty, especially among single-parent households, will remain elevated and children will lose opportunities linked to early learning, socialisation, and development. The report also frames progress on childcare, work-life balance and gender equality as relevant to Ukraine's EU accession pathway.

Conversely, the benefits of action are significant. Expanding ECEC services and family-friendly policies can increase employment, household income, and tax revenues, while strengthening children's development and future human capital. A **comprehensive care economy approach that combines services, policies, workplace measures, social protection and social norms change delivers the strongest impact** on women's employment, child development and long-term economic growth.

Evidence shows that investments in childcare and family-friendly policies yield high economic returns. The ILO estimates that **each dollar invested in childcare policies and services can generate about USD 3.76 in global GDP by 2035** by narrowing gender gaps in employment and pay.

UNICEF ECD Investment Case¹ modelling suggests that expanding access to ECEC could **enable up to 350,000 parents, primarily mothers, to re-enter the labour market by 2030**. Such an expansion would not only benefit families but also help address Ukraine's labour supply challenges. The ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator² estimates that investing in universal childcare services could **generate nearly 177,600 jobs by 2030**, including about 159,100 direct childcare jobs and 18,500 indirect jobs in non-care sectors. These projections highlight the significant economic gains from policies that support mothers' employment and expand childcare services.

Critically, such measures also **advance gender equality and women's rights**. When ECEC services are accessible and affordable, women have greater freedom to choose work, and the norm that childcare is a shared responsibility becomes more attainable in practice. This can gradually shift perceptions. As more fathers take leave or adjust work for family, it normalises shared caregiving, and as more mothers remain in or re-enter the workforce, the gender gaps in employment and leadership can begin to close.

In short, **addressing childcare and women's employment is a win-win for women, children, families, and the nation's prosperity**. The study therefore points to a clear conclusion: tackling the intertwined challenges requires coordinated, multifaceted action, and the payoff for doing so will be a stronger, more equitable Ukraine.

¹ UNICEF, A Brighter Future: An Investment Case in Early Childhood Development in Ukraine. Final report (2024). <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/documents/brighter-future-investment-case>

² ILO, The Care Policy Investment Simulator (2023). <https://pon.org.ua/novyny/10733-prezentovano-globalnyi-symuliator-mop-shcho-do-investuvannia-u-sferu-dogliadu.html>

Recommendations

The study identifies opportunities for coordinated action by national government, local authorities, employers' and workers' organizations, international partners and civil society. It adopts a care economy approach that treats childcare not as a private responsibility but as essential social and economic infrastructure. Expanding women's employment requires simultaneous investment in services, policies, workplace practices and shifts in social norms.

1. National policies and investments in care

At the national level, there is a clear opportunity to position ECEC as essential infrastructure for recovery, labour supply and EU alignment. Treating childcare as part of economic and social infrastructure can support women's employment, strengthen family well-being, and contribute to long-term human capital development.

The central government can lead through a comprehensive strategy and stronger family-friendly legislation aligned with international standards and grounded in social dialogue. Opportunities include designing and implementing integrated care policies and systems that support decent work and gender equality. This includes strengthening **parental leave** design and introducing stronger incentives for fathers' caregiving. Parental leave should be adequately paid, linked to previous earnings, and financed through public or compulsory social insurance systems. Introducing a non-transferable use-it-or-lose-it portion for fathers can encourage shared caregiving. Linking parental leave with a guaranteed ECEC entitlement from the end of maternity, paternity, or adoption leave can help ensure that the transition from leave to employment does not translate into forced inactivity for parents.

Further progress can come from strengthening legal **protections for parents and carers in the labour market**. Reviewing legislation to reinforce protection against workplace discrimination and to establish enforceable rights to request flexible working arrangements can help parents remain connected to employment. The implementation of relevant ILO Conventions and Recommendations, together with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive, offers a clear pathway for Ukraine to strengthen work-family reconciliation policies, embed these rights in national legislation, and further align its policy framework with EU standards.

Alongside legal reforms, **expanding public investment in adequate, accessible, affordable and**

quality ECEC represents a major opportunity. This includes investment in infrastructure and safety, such as reconstruction of facilities damaged by war, construction of shelters and safe rooms, ensuring access for children with disabilities, improved staffing levels, and strengthened quality assurance systems. Investments can support accessibility for children with disabilities and special educational needs, including barrier-free infrastructure, adapted learning environments, and trained educators able to provide inclusive early childhood education.

Affordability remains a critical dimension. Increasing **inclusive financing mechanisms** can help ensure that families are able to use available services. Expanding childcare subsidies, vouchers, or cost-sharing schemes, alongside widening eligibility for programmes such as the Municipal Nanny or eYasla, can reduce financial barriers and enable more parents to enter or remain in employment. Aligning social protection with childcare expansion is critical. Financial support mechanisms should be designed to complement, not substitute, access to services, ensuring that parents can enter employment without losing income security.

Another opportunity lies in strengthening the regulatory environment for diverse forms of childcare provision. Improving licensing, monitoring, and quality assurance for **alternative ECEC models**, including smaller community-based or home-based services, can support safe expansion of childcare options while encouraging providers to formalise their services.

Effective **national coordination** can support these efforts. Establishing an integrated care strategy that connects childcare expansion with parental leave, labour market participation, and social protection policies can help align actions across ministries responsible for education, social policy, labour and finance. Clear targets and monitoring mechanisms can guide implementation, including progress toward the Barcelona childcare coverage targets by 2030 and other EU aligned benchmarks.

Finally, national level initiatives can contribute to **shifting social norms around caregiving**. Public awareness efforts that highlight the value of ECEC and promote shared parenting can reinforce policy reforms. Showcasing fathers who take paternity leave, employers that support family-friendly workplaces and communities that invest in childcare can help reshape expectations and strengthen acceptance of more equal caregiving roles.

Taken together, these opportunities position the national level to create an enabling environment

through family-friendly legislation, sustainable financing, service infrastructure, clear regulation, and public engagement that recognises the value of care and advances gender equality by enabling women's employment as a driver of inclusive development.

2. Local innovations and service delivery

Local authorities are at the frontline of service provision and play a critical role in expanding childcare access in ways that respond to the realities of their communities. Municipal and subnational governments are well positioned to test flexible solutions, respond to displacement-related pressures and adapt services to local labour markets and family needs.

A key opportunity lies in **mapping local demand and identifying service gaps**. Local authorities can assess where shortages of ECEC places are most acute, including areas affected by displacement or population shifts caused by the war. This data can guide more effective planning and help municipalities prioritise neighbourhoods or rural settlements where additional childcare services are most urgently needed.

With clearer information on demand, municipalities can **optimize the use of existing infrastructure**. Underused public spaces such as schools, community centres, libraries, or cultural facilities can be repurposed or expanded to host childcare services, provided they meet safety standards, including access to air raid shelters where required. In areas with dispersed populations or small numbers of children, local authorities may also explore mobile or rotating childcare services, where trained educators visit remote communities on scheduled days.

Local governments can also pilot more **diverse and flexible childcare formats** that respond to different working patterns. These may include part-time nursery groups, extended-hour programmes, seasonal or holiday childcare, and community-based playgroups. Such formats can help families who work part-time, shift work, or non-standard hours to access childcare that fits their schedules.

Partnerships represent another important pathway for expanding supply. Municipalities can **collaborate with employers, civil society organizations, and private providers** to establish new childcare services where public provision alone cannot meet demand. For example, local authorities may provide premises or facilitate permits, employers or international development partners may contribute financing, and

NGOs or private operators may deliver services. Public-private and community partnerships of this kind can help expand ECEC capacity more rapidly while sharing costs and expertise.

Targeted support for vulnerable families is also essential. Local authorities can reserve subsidized childcare places for low-income households, single parents and families facing economic hardship. Additional measures may include transport support for families living far from ECEC institutions, outreach through social workers or community councils, and closer links between childcare services and other social support programmes. These approaches can help ensure that groups such as internally displaced families, families of veterans, Roma communities and families raising children with disabilities are able to access available services.

Improving access to information is a practical and low-cost intervention. Local authorities can establish centralized information platforms or designate social workers to guide families through available childcare options and support services.

Local expansion of ECEC services also creates an opportunity for municipalities to strengthen decent work conditions for the childcare workforce across centre-based, home-based and partnership models. In line with ILO Policy Guidelines on decent work for ECEC personnel, municipalities can use licensing, contracting and financing mechanisms to promote written contracts, fair remuneration aligned with pay equity principles, manageable workloads, and access to social and labour protection, including maternity protection. Attention to safe and healthy workplaces, including occupational safety and health measures and protection from violence and harassment, can further support staff retention, service quality and the sustainability of ECEC services.

Finally, local governments have an opportunity to strengthen the sustainability of childcare services through **local planning and financing**. Treating ECEC as a core municipal service can help secure more predictable funding, whether through dedicated budget allocations, local education funds, or partnerships with national programmes. Successful local models can also generate practical lessons that inform national scale up and contribute to broader care economy reforms.

Through flexible service design, targeted support and innovative partnerships, local authorities can expand ECEC access, improve service quality and help more parents participate in the labour market.

3. Engaging employers and family-friendly workplaces

Employers and employers' organizations play an important role in shaping a labour market that enables parents to participate fully in paid work. Companies have practical opportunities to reduce barriers that keep many mothers out of employment while supporting more equal caregiving between women and men.

One key area of action lies in **strengthening the role of employers' organizations in social dialogue with workers' organizations and policymakers** to help design practical work-family measures that reflect both business realities and workers' needs. This can include promoting flexible working arrangements, non-discrimination practices and employer-supported childcare solutions, particularly through models accessible to small- and medium-sized enterprises. Employers' organizations can also raise awareness of the business case for family-friendly policies by sharing evidence on improved retention, productivity and employer reputation, while ensuring that employees are informed about available public support.

Another key area of action lies in **strengthening family-friendly workplace policies** within companies. Expanding flexible work options such as adjustable working hours, remote or hybrid arrangements, part-time schedules and predictable shift planning can make it easier for parents to combine employment with care responsibilities. These measures often require limited financial investment yet can significantly improve employee retention, well-being, and productivity.

Workplace cultures also influence how **care responsibilities are shared**. Employers can contribute to more equal participation by normalising fathers' uptake of paternity and parental leave. Clear internal policies, leadership support, and visible examples of male employees taking leave can help create an environment where shared caregiving is accepted and encouraged. Practical measures such as breastfeeding rooms and child-friendly facilities at the workplace can further support parents of young children.

Employers also have an opportunity to strengthen **fairness in recruitment and career progression**. Bias-aware human resources practices and transparent recruitment and evaluation procedures can help prevent discrimination against parents, particularly mothers. Training for managers and HR staff can address assumptions about women's commitment

to work after childbirth and ensure that employees with care responsibilities are assessed on equal terms.

Supporting women who return to work after a career break represents another important pathway. Companies may introduce structured return-to-work programmes, mentoring schemes, or short-term training opportunities that help mothers rebuild professional networks and update skills after parental leave. Such initiatives help ease the transition back to employment and signal that career progression remains possible after time spent caring for children.

In addition, employers, particularly large firms or employer networks, may contribute directly to **expanding childcare access**. This can include partnerships with ECEC providers, financial contributions to community childcare services, or support for childcare vouchers or subsidies that help employees manage care costs. In contexts marked by labour shortages and workforce mobility, such initiatives can also strengthen an employer's ability to attract and retain skilled workers.

Through these actions, employers can help create workplaces where family responsibilities do not limit career opportunities. Supporting parents in the workforce represents not only a social commitment but also a strategic investment in human capital, workforce stability and long-term productivity.

4. Workers' organizations and social dialogue

Workers' organizations represent an important partner in shaping labour market and care policies that reflect the realities of workers with family responsibilities. They can contribute to strengthening **awareness of parental rights and protections** through practical information campaigns on maternity and paternity leave, parental leave, job protection, breastfeeding breaks and the right to request flexible working arrangements. Legal aid, helpdesks and support for pregnancy and caregiving-related disputes, including for internally displaced workers, can help prevent discrimination and strengthen the enforcement of existing rights. Through collective bargaining and participation in national and local social dialogue, workers' organizations can also promote flexible working arrangements, protections for parents returning from leave and employer support for childcare.

Over time, workers' organizations can play a broader role in **advancing care economy reforms through**

social dialogue. This includes supporting public investment in childcare, strengthening parental leave provisions and promoting decent working conditions for care workers. They can also contribute to programmes that support women's return to work after care breaks through re-skilling, mentoring and returnship opportunities, particularly for displaced women and single mothers. By promoting family-friendly workplace agreements that go beyond legal minimum standards and by encouraging cultural change that normalises shared caregiving, including men's use of parental leave, workers' organizations can help position care as a shared social responsibility linked to decent work and gender equality.

5. International partners and civil society collaboration

International organizations, donors and civil society actors are important partners in advancing childcare expansion and women's economic empowerment in Ukraine. In the context of recovery and reconstruction, there is a strong opportunity for international development partners to prioritise investments in childcare and the broader care economy as part of humanitarian and development assistance.

One key contribution lies in **supporting reconstruction and service expansion.** International partners can help finance the construction and rehabilitation of ECEC facilities, particularly in war-affected regions and underserved communities where infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed. Investments that strengthen social infrastructure alongside physical reconstruction can help ensure that recovery efforts support families, labour market participation and long-term human capital development.

International partners can also provide **technical assistance for policy development and system strengthening.** This may include support for the design of an integrated national care strategy, development of monitoring and data systems, and alignment of national frameworks with EU standards and international conventions. Organizations such as UNICEF, the ILO, the EU, the World Bank and bilateral donors are well positioned to mobilize resources, share global experience and support institutional capacity to implement care economy reforms.

Another important area of collaboration involves **scaling up innovative childcare models and strengthening the care workforce.** Development partners can support programmes for alternative ECEC formats. Investment in workforce develop-

ment, including training and professional development for childcare workers, can also help expand service quality and availability, while supporting the care workforce with skilled and decent jobs.

Civil society organizations bring a complementary role grounded in **community engagement** and accountability. Women's rights organizations, parent associations, and local NGOs often work closely with families and can identify gaps that formal systems may overlook. They can contribute by delivering community level childcare initiatives such as playgroups, toy libraries, and caregiver cooperatives, particularly in areas where public services remain limited. Partnerships can also support system navigation and outreach, ensuring that families, especially vulnerable groups, are aware of and able to access available services.

Civil society actors also play an important role in **promoting social norm change.** Through public communication, community dialogue, and partnerships with local leaders and media, they can help promote positive narratives around shared caregiving, involved fatherhood and the developmental value of ECEC. Grounding these efforts in parents' lived experiences helps ensure that policy reforms resonate with the realities families face.

Finally, sustained collaboration across sectors can **strengthen coordination and accountability.** Multi-stakeholder platforms that bring together government institutions, employers' and workers' organizations, international partners, and civil society can help align efforts, share evidence, and monitor progress. Such forums can support policy dialogue, encourage innovation, and ensure that ECEC expansion remains a shared national priority within Ukraine's broader recovery and EU integration agenda.

Overall, the report's core message is that Ukraine can unlock women's economic participation by building an integrated care system that combines accessible childcare, supportive labour market policies and practices, inclusive social protection and more equal social norms, with targeted support for vulnerable families and inclusive design for children with disabilities and SEN. Coordinated reforms can deliver immediate gains in mothers' employment and household income, while strengthening child development, human capital, and long-term recovery outcomes.