



the
motherload
project.



Caring for the Caregivers: Reimagining Early Childhood Development Through the Motherload Lens

Early Childhood Systems: Perspectives and Research Webinar Series
5 November 2025
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In collaboration with



IDRC · CRDI

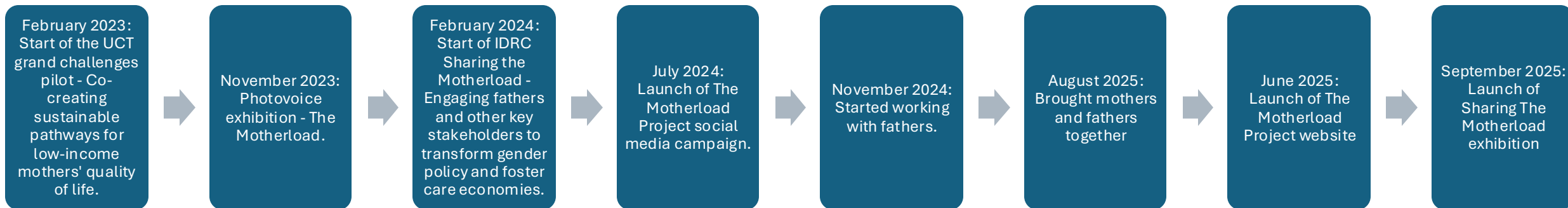


Canada

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada, and is funded by the Government of Canada



Timeline of The Motherload's significant moments





mother load

PHOTOVOICE EXHIBITION

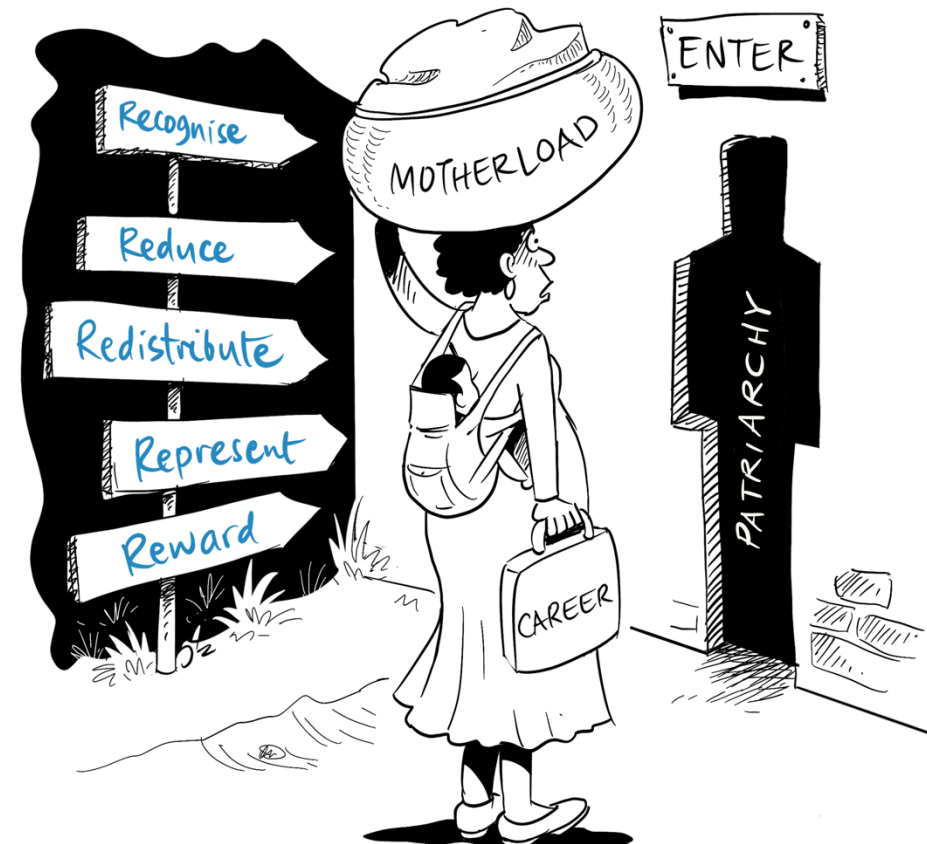
**Untold stories of our
strengths, struggles and
needs**

November 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHZcUytaJkA>

Problems surfaced by the pilot

- Entrenched gender ideologies frame care as *natural*.
- Attention to *labour* mostly neglects social reproduction.
- Care work as labour is unfairly distributed, under-recognised and undervalued.
- Low-income moms trapped in cycles of time poverty, economic exclusion, and emotional exhaustion—perpetuating intergenerational poverty.
- Policies miss the integrated lived realities.



What is The Motherload?



WHAT IS THE MOTHERLOAD?

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

HISTORICAL LEGACIES

The lasting effects of **colonialism** and **apartheid** create heavy burdens for mothers.

- Lack of support for **women headed households**
- The breakdown of **community** (Ubuntu)
- Extreme **economic inequalities**, and
- **Unsafe** and **violent** environments



INSTITUTIONAL AND INFRASTRUCTURE FAILURES

Deficient infrastructure

- Unreliable electricity
- Poor sanitation
- Lack of safe housing
- Lack of affordable, quality childcare
- Unsafe, unreliable, and costly public transport



All these factors raise safety concerns for mothers and make it harder for women to participate in the economy.

BACK TO SCHOOL STRESSES FOR MOMS:

1. EXTRA COSTS

School lunches, books, stationery, school uniform, and more.



2. UNPLANNED EXPENSES

Civics days, events, and surprise fees.



3. FITTING IN

Pressure to buy new clothes and shoes.



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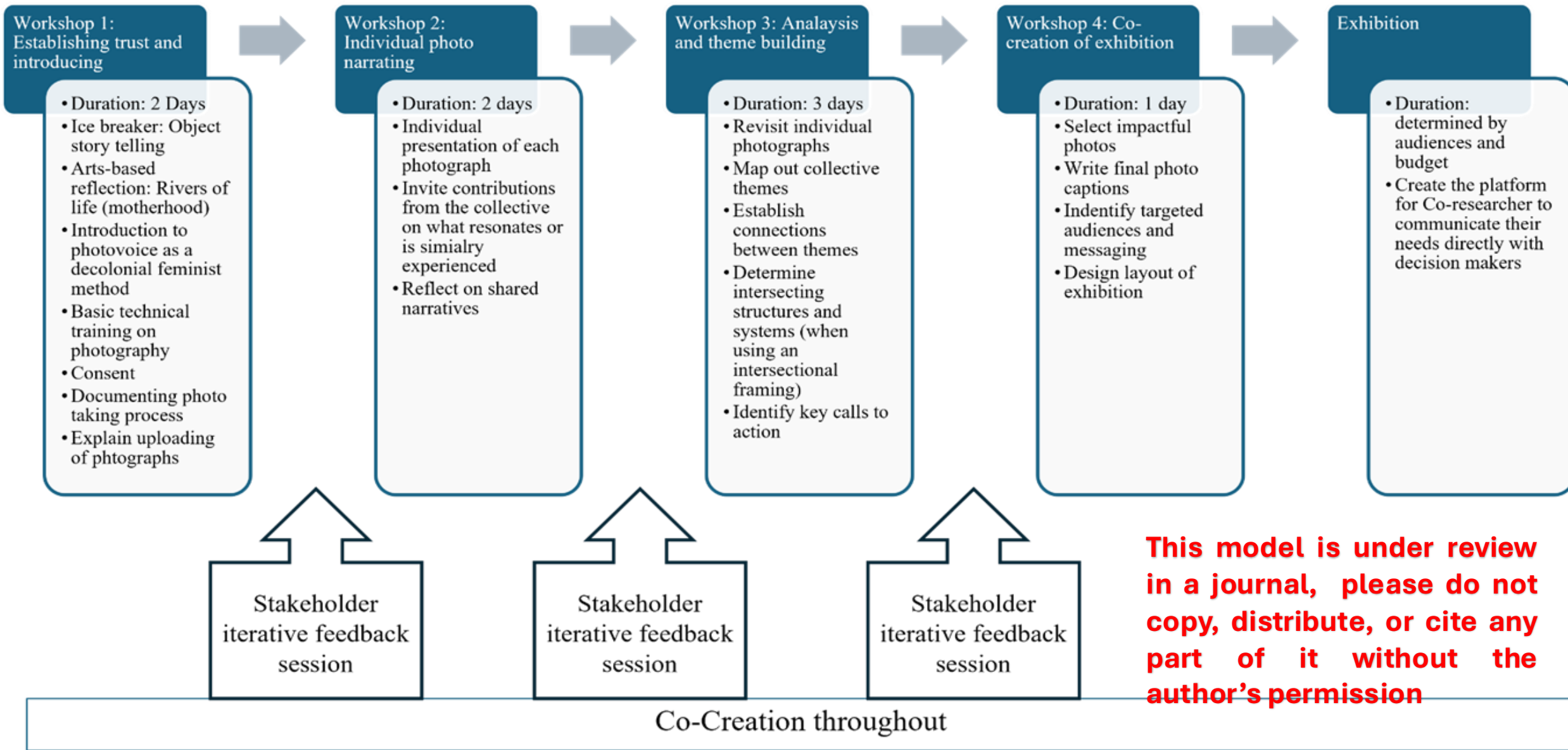


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Our approach – The How

- **Decolonial, feminist project** - centring low-income mothers as experts, VALID knowledge
- **Collaborative** - partnered with 11 low-income mothers (and 11 fathers), government and civil society partners, and a team of transdisciplinary academics
- **Centres an ethics of care** - On site childcare, transport, healing
- **Creative** - Photovoice and arts-based methods
- **Iterative** feedback loops
- **Feminine led** – compassion, inclusivity, trust

Iterative feedback loop model



Mothers photo prompts

1. Things that influence how you mother and experience the motherload,
2. All the things that are difficult to co-exist with mothering,
3. What is missing in care services, programs, and other services that mothers need?,
4. What does a community that uplifts and cares for low-income mothers look like?



Image of young girls with backpack walking to school in an informal settlement.

Theme 1: Bright light/ Ukhanyo

Ubunzima bokukhapha umntwana, ekuseni xa esiya esikolweni. Ngoba kufuneka uqinisekise ukuba uphephile.

The difficulty of accompanying a child in the morning when they go to school, because you must make sure that they are safe.



Image of thick grass growing in a rough terrain — an unusual place to see grass growing.

Theme 2: Rough Road

It's difficult to grow as a mother or as a person in a community with so many setbacks. From applying for jobs to attending clinic visits, there are limited support structures; instead, **these facilities often play a role in bringing a person down.**

Theme 3: Entanglement

The different cloths on the line represent the mothers moving through the various government services such as Daycare, Elderly and Trauma Care.

Whilst these services are available, they are not easy to navigate. Some services have apps through which you can book appointments. These apps are supposed to make it easy, but sometimes they delay in responding, which can cause you to miss an appointment and have to wait another month for the next one. This can lead to a lot of anxiety and confusion.

It is then again the mother's responsibility to find her way through this confusion. Like the cloths on the washing line, some of which share the pegs and some don't, we as moms need support. We often just get sent left and right and we are just hanging in there.



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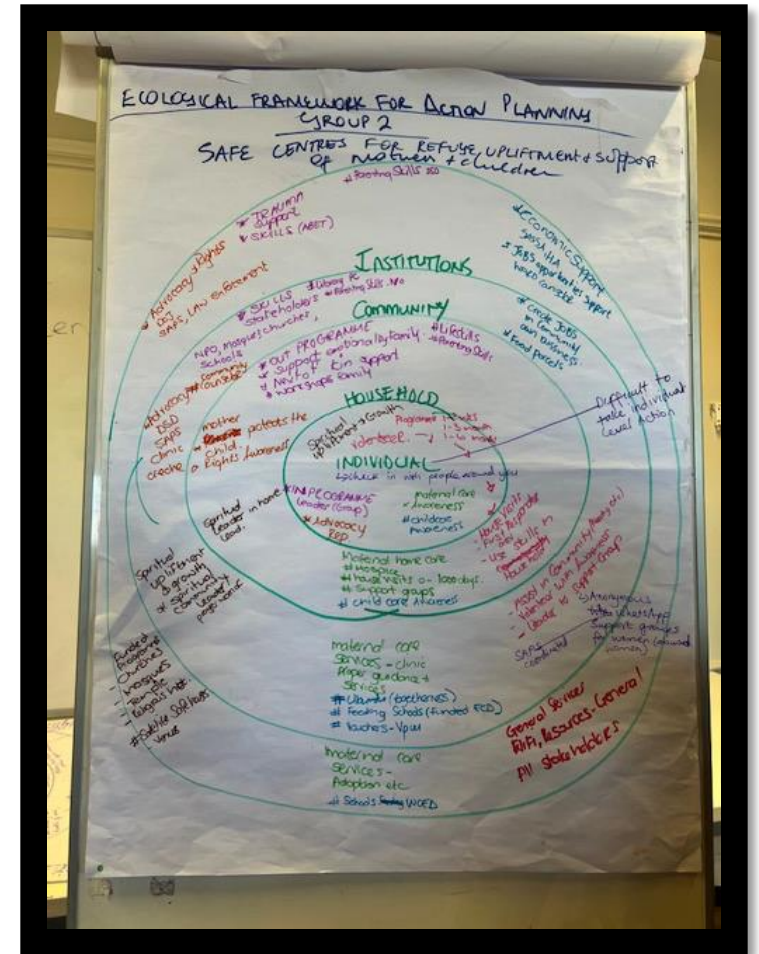
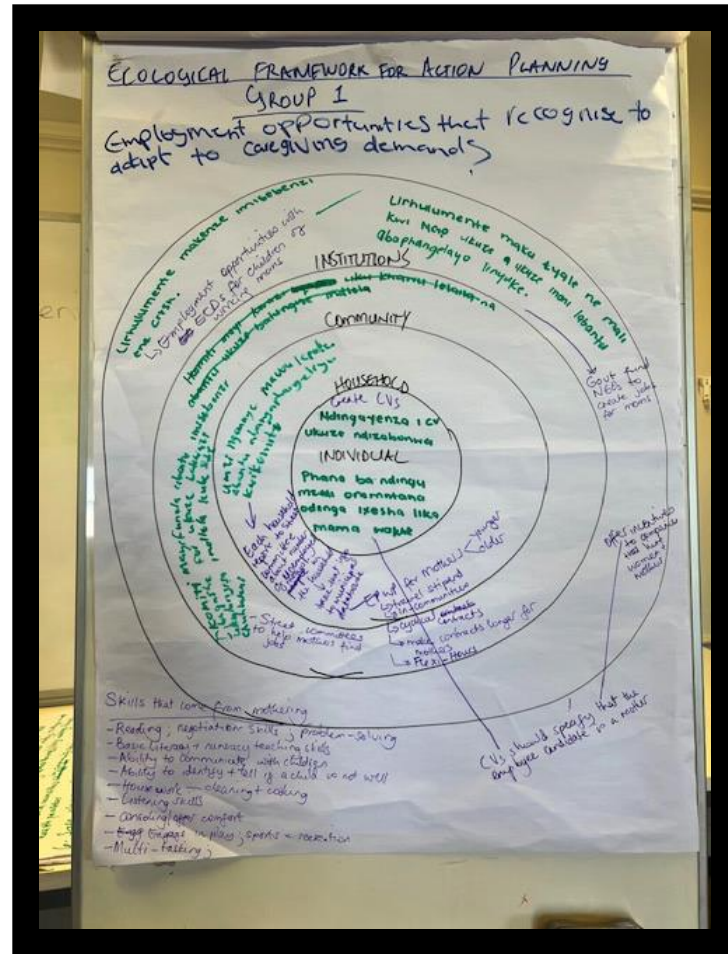
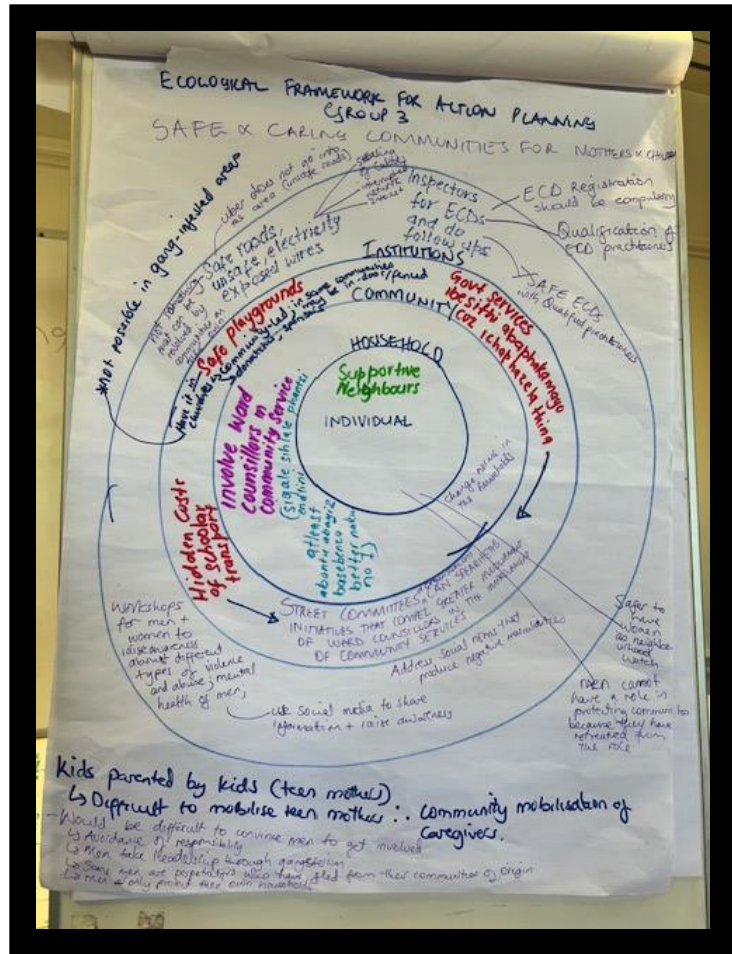
Image of several dish cloths hanging to dry on a washing line.

Image of a mom's hand holding
an empty cigarette box.

Theme 4: Cigarette Box

As a young mom, I sometimes feel very empty inside. But in the back of my mind, I know there will be light and beauty. Communities can be kinder to young mothers who seek assistance. Instead of gossiping about people's problems, they can listen and provide a supportive and safe role.

Mothers' analysis



Mothers' call to action

Employment opportunities that recognise and adapt to caregiving demands

1. Create decent work for mothers that meets caregiving demands
2. Design jobs in ways that allow mothers to spend time with their children
3. Jobs must pay enough to take care of mothers' and children's needs
4. Create jobs close to where low-income mothers live, reducing travel burdens and ensuring quick access in child-related emergencies
5. Establish affordable and quality ECD centres and crèches close to where mothers work
6. Workplaces must offer child care supports
7. Expand employment opportunities for mothers in child-focused services (e.g. schools, libraries, ECD centres)
8. Align work schedules with childcare facility hours to ensure children's safety
9. Create flexible jobs and work arrangements to support caregiving
10. Provide WIFI-enabled community spaces for mothers to access and apply for jobs

mothers' call to action

"Mom hubs": Safe, accessible spaces offering co-ordinated support services for mothers

The range of coordinated services include:

1. Affordable, fair financial support mechanisms (e.g., small loans) that protect mothers from exploitative lending and debt traps
2. Skills training and employment pathways (e.g., CV development, entrepreneurship, critical digital literacy)
3. Adult basic education programmes
4. Parenting programmes that strengthen mothers' wellbeing and distributes The Motherload
5. Ad hoc and short term crèche and babysitting services (e.g., if a mother needs to attend a job interview)
6. Free, reliable WiFi access to support job-seeking and digital inclusion
7. Women's health services, including reproductive and maternal care
8. Safe house facilities and protection services for women facing violence
9. Self-care and wellbeing services (e.g. yoga, relaxation, mental health)
10. Counselling and legal aid services to uphold women's rights

mothers' call to action

Safe and caring communities for mothers and children

1. Foster communities with supportive neighbours – creating ways for neighbours to help each other
2. Establish community "libraries of things" (shared resources like kitchen utensils, tools, toys) to reduce household burdens
3. Monitor and strengthen the quality of ECD centres and crèches by ensuring safety standards, qualified and competent staff. Provide government support for non-compliance rather than shutting down the needed services
4. Strengthen essential services by ensuring 24hr access in communities (e.g., police and hospitals)
5. Enforce strict confidentiality protocols in public hospitals to protect mothers' dignity
6. Invest in safe, affordable public transport designed for women and children
7. Create emotionally safe communities by reducing judgment of mothers from community members and addressing social norms that harden men
8. Build public art and cultural centres in low-income communities to create safe gathering spaces and build community connection
9. Strengthen ward councillor accountability
10. Improve neighbourhood safety and child-friendly infrastructure, including safe playgrounds where children can play, giving mothers rest time

mothers' call to action

Engaging fathers

- How do fathers' perspectives on care provide a more complex understanding of the motherload
- How do fathers' perspectives on care, help develop responses to shift gender norms and redistribute the motherload

Photo prompts - fathers



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Fathers understanding of visible and invisible care

Causes of the motherload

Men's barriers to engaging in care work

The role of men in reducing the motherload

Image of a a cracked tile.



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A duty for her to look after people

This is the invisible load that the mother is carrying. She is broken, but because we have a duty for her to look after people, and to make people happy, she must let them walk on top of her. If she doesn't, she will feel like she didn't do her job. The tile needs to be replaced, but we won't change it because we feel like it's still ok, it's still there.

Fathers' call to action



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Build gender-equal care systems

1. Provide free tertiary education through educational grants, improving fathers' opportunities to better their family's livelihoods
2. Incorporate awareness of unpaid care work as a topic in school curricula (e.g., Life orientation) to shift gender norms
3. Guarantee equal maternity and paternity leave that is paid and legally protected
4. Extend family responsibility leave for fathers to at least 10 days, so men can care for children and support mothers
5. Establish mechanisms to improve communication between families, communities, and policymakers to address unpaid work
6. Promote men/father involvement in care giving through campaigns, media, and programmes, to help shift gender norms and distribute the load
7. Strengthen government commitment to gender-equal caregiving policies

fathers' call to action

Social and community programmes that promote men's involvement in care work


1. Promote programmes (e.g., family strengthening) that help fathers take equal responsibility for childcare and household duties, and be present, patient, and respectful in their families
2. Offer programmes that encourage fathers to be caregiver role models
3. Advocate for equal child support laws that apply fairly to both fathers and mothers
4. Legislate equal parental leave, ensuring paternity leave is the same as maternity leave
5. Create initiatives that encourage men to be part of Early Childhood Development (ECD) teaching and caregiving
6. Create community support and training programmes that facilitate open group forums where fathers can learn and speak about fathering and caregiving
7. Use schools, national and social media, and campaigns to raise awareness and share examples of positive fatherhood
8. Provide psychologically safe spaces for fathers and mothers to openly discuss parenting challenges and share experiences

fathers' call to action

Address Absent fathers (including present but absent fathers)

1. Promote campaigns on responsible fatherhood – love, care, and presence matter more than money
2. Support programmes where fathers learn to build mutual respect and friendships with children for healthy father-child relationships
3. Establish accessible recreational activities in communities (e.g., sports or entertainment) for fathers to bond with their children. Initiatives like "Take a Child to Work" can also strengthen father-child connections
4. Develop community-based programmes that include fathers, stepfathers, social fathers, and father figures in caregiving roles
5. Establish volunteering opportunities for young boys that promotes care work as a life skill, and develops caring and nurturing skills, contributing to more socially conscious adult men and more caring fathers
6. Create opportunities for fathers to volunteer in child-related facilities (e.g., schools), normalising fathers' engagement in education related care work and contributing to greater involvement in other forms of care work
7. Provide counselling support for fathers facing challenges (e.g., unemployment, substance abuse, or stress)
8. Establish dialogue platforms for fathers and mothers to discuss parenting challenges in safe, accessible ways
9. Expand job opportunities to reduce fathers being absent due to the shame of unemployment

fathers' call to action



In August we brought
the mothers and the
fathers in a gender
fishbowl exercise.

Sharing the motherload exhibition



the motherload project.

Sharing The Motherload :
Engaging fathers and other key stakeholders to transform gender policy and foster care economies

Mothers
Zaakira Peck
Nombiso Bunu
Onwabile Matolo
Masibulele Makhaluza
Olwethu Mdlazeka
Nadine Nagan-Alexander
Almaaz Abrahams
Ncumisa Mgwaki
Yola Schalk

Fathers
Mandla 'Jahkongo' Qotsini
Duran Byman
Marius Coetzee
Sibulele Mbasane
Tsepo "Judah" Mtwana
Shannon Daniels
Mkhululi Chris Mfiki
Nolin Christians
Phuwe Mjiji

In 2023, a group of mothers developed a powerful exhibition reflecting on their lived experiences of unpaid care work. We called it "The Motherload". Now it's been expanded to include fathers' voices with the aim to shift gender norms. Using photographs and storytelling, mothers and fathers explore ways of working together to illuminate the struggles, strengths, and hopes that define daily care in the context of enduring gender and economic inequality, and colonial and apartheid legacies. The aim is to create caring economies that recognise and value mothers' unpaid care work by making it visible, reducing it, and distributing it more equitably. Their collective work offers critical insights to inform policy, infrastructure, and community practice.

PHOTOVOICE SHOWCASE

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The Motherload showcase sheds light on how gender and economic inequality, shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies, continues to define caregiving.

Through photographs and stories, mothers and fathers reveal the struggles, strengths, and hopes of daily care.

sharing the motherload

Iziko South African National Gallery, Annex
20 September – 15 October 2025 | Open daily 9am – 4pm | Free entry

Learn more & stay connected | <https://commerce.uct.ac.za/motherload-project> | The Motherload Project | @the_Motherload_Project

Social and community programmes that promote men's involvement in care work

1. Promote programmes (e.g. family strengthening) that help fathers take equal responsibility for childcare and household duties, and be present, patient, and respectful in their families.
2. Offer programmes that encourage fathers to be caregivers in their homes.
3. Advocate for equal child support laws that apply fairly to both fathers and mothers.
4. Legislate equal parental leave, ensuring paternity leave is the same as maternity leave.
5. Create initiatives that encourage men to be part of Early Childhood Development (ECD) teaching and caregiving.
6. Create community support and training programmes that facilitate open group forums where fathers can learn and speak about parenting and caregiving.
7. Use various, national and social media, and campaigns to raise awareness and share examples of positive fatherhood.
8. Provide psychosocially safe spaces for fathers and share experiences.

Fathers' call to action

Build

1. Provide free tertiary education to improve fathers' livelihoods.
2. Incorporate awareness into school curricula (e.g. gender equality).
3. Guarantee equal maternity and legally protected paternity leave.
4. Extend family responsibility days, so men can care for their families.
5. Establish mechanisms to involve fathers in families, communities, and workplaces.
6. Promote men/father involvement campaigns, media, and programmes that challenge gender norms and distribute the load.
7. Strengthen government commitment to supporting caregiving policies.

Fathers' call to action

What is missing in services and programmes that we (mothers) need

Impact for the moms (from the moms)



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Better communication with partner and children

Learning to ask for help

Some help from partners in the household and with childcare

When the motherload becomes visible, mens' behaviour changes, more harmony, less stress in the home, fewer arguments

Children are more aware of The Motherload as a concept

Talking about The Motherload more openly with others and sharing solutions (space feels safe)

Comforting knowing other mothers are going through this (not a "me" problem), recognition of systemic cause and failures

Remembering their value even when partners devalue them

Impact for the community partner – Flourish



1. Programmatic Shifts

- Removed user fees - antenatal/postnatal groups, reducing financial strain.
- Resulted in increased participation: From 11,000 (2023) to 18,000 (2024) mothers.
- Hosts now paid directly by the NGO via external funding, enhancing equity.

2. Economic Empowerment

- Hosts' earning potential increased, recruit more mothers
- More graduates → more potential hosts → hosts access career pathways and promotions within Flourish

3. Ideological and Training Shifts

- Concept of The Motherload integrated into curriculum, training, and maternal mental health modules.
- Peer support and recognition of mothers' lived experiences.
- Reached: 11 trainers, 120 programme hosts, 1508 mothers (Q1 2025)

4. Systemic & Funding Shifts

- Advocacy for funding reform in social enterprise models: Mothers as workers, not just beneficiaries.
- Informs engagement with private sector funders
- Social employment initiatives
- UNICEF's Nurturing Care framework

Impact for provincial government partner - WCG



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1. Jobs and Economic Design Shifts

- Recognized low-paid, short-term jobs as gendered debt-traps.
- Prompted review of job design to account for childcare and transport costs.

2. Policy and Strategic Planning Shifts

- Moved beyond cash grants to invest in care infrastructure.
- Adopted multi-level interventions addressing household and community realities.
- ‘Care’ reframed as essential infrastructure for gender equality and financial inclusion.

3. Malnutrition and Health Response

- Motherload insights helped reframe understanding of malnutrition.
- Piloting ‘Khulisa Care’ program for vulnerable mothers (low-weight mothers & low-birth-weight babies) -- Monthly grant + Community Health Worker home visits to support maternal/child health.

4. Systems Integration and Advocacy

- Revealed fragmented services and gender-blind policy design.
- Informed integrated government response and lobbying at national level and gender-sensitive strategic planning frameworks.

5. Long-Term Impact Vision

- Better infant health improves women’s short-term employability.
- Reducing childhood stunting/obesity improves future employment potential.

Contributions - The Motherload lens

- Transformative and integrated policy rooted in lived reality
- Shifts business and policy discourse to view care as a collective social responsibility rather than a private burden.
- A holistic ecosystem that **values and supports caregivers alongside children**
- Highlights areas needing attention to build more equitable and thriving communities, including:
 - Investments that free up women's time
 - Expanding access to quality childcare
 - Enhancing transport and digital infrastructure
 - Creating pathways for women's skills development and economic participation that recognise care demands
- Offer evidence for investment in care infrastructure
- Rigorous collaborative method - Partnerships are key: communities, caregivers, policy makers, EC actors, funders.

Some questions to ponder

How do we bring mothers employment (space and time) and ECDs into greater alignment?

How do we engage low-income mothers with more dignity in services (and a full understanding of the labour they carry – material, mental, emotional)?

How do we reduce The Motherload and redistribute it to fathers, communities, and the state?

How do we ensure that lived reality as a valid form of knowledge is informing our decisions, practices, and policies?

Thank you

How can you engage The Motherload in your work?



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