



From Data to Public Debate: The Role of Media in Shaping Care Narratives

Media organizations play a powerful role in shaping how societies understand development challenges and which issues receive public and political attention. Through reporting, framing, and editorial choices, journalists shape how citizens and decision-makers interpret evidence, understand social and economic issues, and identify priorities for action. What gets reported shapes what gets discussed – and issues absent from media coverage rarely become public or political priorities.

One issue that has remained underreported or narrowly framed is care work – the paid and unpaid labor that sustains households, economies, and communities every day. Although unpaid care is often viewed as a private household responsibility, its effects extend far beyond the home, influencing economic participation,

productivity, inequality, and social wellbeing. By framing care as a development and economic issue – rather than a private concern or gender issue – media organizations can elevate care from an overlooked household reality to a matter of public debate and policy relevance.

This creates an opportunity for journalists to use evidence, data, and lived experiences to tell compelling public-interest stories connecting care to broader economic and development outcomes. This brief demonstrates that care is not simply a social issue, but a fundamental economic and development issue shaping productivity, labor force participation, inequality, and community wellbeing – and therefore warrants greater public debate, political attention, and policy action.

Care is an Economic Story

Behind every care challenge is a bigger development issue



**Time spent
collecting water**



Economic impact
*Lost income-earning
opportunities*



**Reliance on
grandparents for childcare**



Economic impact
*Dependence on
informal care systems*



**Limited access to
childcare services**



Economic impact
*Lower female labor
force participation*



Every economy depends on care



Why Care Systems Matter

Care is not only a social issue, but also an economic and development issue: how care responsibilities are allocated shapes how people use their time, whether they can participate in paid work, and how children and other dependents are supported. As a result, care systems shape labor force participation, productivity, human capital development, inequality, and broader development outcomes.

For example, when women spend long hours collecting water due to inadequate infrastructure, the time devoted to this essential caregiving task reduces opportunities for paid work, education, and income generation. When older people assume responsibility for caring for grandchildren, it can reflect broader demographic and social changes — including migration, parental absence, illness, or economic hardship — often increasing care burdens while exposing gaps in social protection for both caregivers and children.

Similarly, limited access to affordable childcare can constrain labor force participation, particularly for women, forcing many to reduce working hours, accept lower-paying jobs, or leave the workforce altogether. This reduces household income, limits productivity and growth, and narrows the tax base by reducing the number of people earning taxable income.

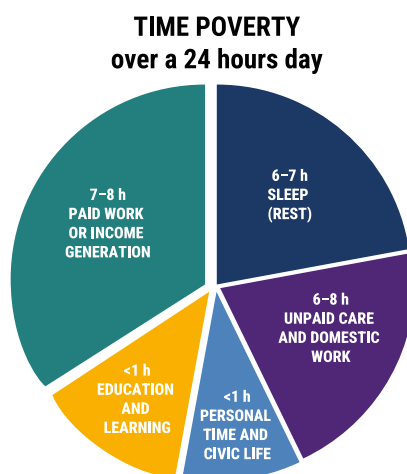
These examples illustrate how care-related challenges are linked to broader infrastructure, demographic, labor market, and policy conditions. They also show that care is shaped by policy choices: investments in water infrastructure, childcare services, social protection, health systems, and other public services determine how care responsibilities are distributed and whether they support or constrain economic participation, productivity, and human development.

Key Evidence Relevant to Media

Unpaid care work represents a significant share of total work and remains essential to economic functioning. Time Use Surveys track how people allocate time across unpaid care, paid work, and daily activities¹ — making otherwise invisible care work visible, and providing journalists with evidence to support stories about water access, childcare, employment, women's economic opportunities, and time poverty.

Time poverty limits opportunities, wellbeing, and development.²

Demographic shifts such as aging, migration, and changing family structures are also transforming who provides care, increasing demands on households, labor systems, and social protection systems³ — and creating new story opportunities for journalists.

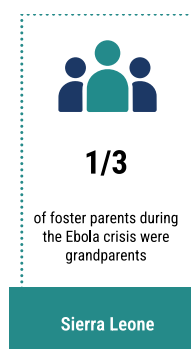
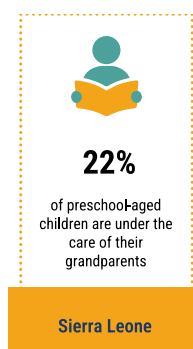
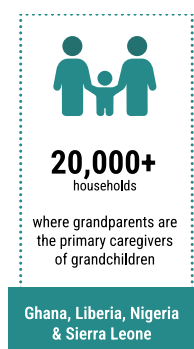


WHEN UNPAID CARE TAKES MORE TIME



These trends are creating new care realities — and new demands for care, health, and social protection services. Together, these sources of evidence help transform individual experiences into broader stories about employment, social protection, infrastructure, economic participation, and development planning, helping audiences understand how care responsibilities are shaped by social, economic, and policy factors, and why they matter for development.

Across West Africa, grandparents are stepping in, reflecting migration, parental absence, economic hardship, and other social changes.



WHY THIS MATTERS FOR STORIES

- Demographic and social changes are transforming who provides care.
- Older caregivers face increased responsibilities and often lack support.
- Children's well-being depends on the capacity of these caregivers.
- Growing demands call for stronger social protection and care services

Grandparents as caregivers: a growing and often overlooked reality.^{4,5}

What This Means for Media

Media professionals have a unique opportunity to use a care lens to strengthen existing reporting – on water, employment, migration, aging, infrastructure, public services, inequality, and development. Care is not a separate beat; it is a way of understanding how care responsibilities shape economic participation, wellbeing, and development outcomes.

Journalists control not only which stories are covered, but how they are framed – shaping how audiences understand causes, consequences, and policy implications. A story about a woman spending hours collecting water, for example, can be framed as a human-interest story, an infrastructure

challenge, an economic issue affecting productivity, or a public policy issue linked to government investment and service delivery.

Using a care lens helps journalists move beyond individual experiences to examine the systems, institutions, and policy choices that shape care responsibilities. It can also strengthen accountability reporting – encouraging journalists to investigate whether governments are meeting their commitments to services and infrastructure that support care, or whether families are left to shoulder these responsibilities on their own.

One Issue, Multiple Story Angles

Traditional Angle	Care and Development Angle
Water Infrastructure and Service Delivery	Time Poverty, Productivity, and Economic Participation
Childcare Family Responsibility	Labor Force Participation, Employment, and Economic Growth
Aging Social Welfare Issue	Demographic Change, Dependency Patterns, and Future Care Needs
Disability Health and Social Services	Inclusion, Access to Services, and Participation in Society and the Economy

The facts do not change, but the angle can change how audiences understand the causes of a problem, who is affected, and what policy responses may be needed. By applying a care lens, journalists can move beyond individual experiences to examine the systems, institutions, and public investments that shape care responsibilities and development outcomes.

Do's and Don'ts for Applying a Care Lens to Reporting

Reporting on care is not about creating a new reporting beat; it is about applying a care lens to stories journalists already cover. The way a story is framed shapes how audiences understand its causes, consequences, and potential solutions. The following Do's and Don'ts provide practical guidance for applying this lens effectively.

DO	DON'T
Treat care as an economic, social, and development issue.	Treat care solely as a private family matter.
Use data to connect individual experiences to broader trends and policy issues.	Rely solely on personal stories without evidence or context.
Explore how care responsibilities affect employment, education, health, and wellbeing.	Focus only on caregiving tasks without examining their broader consequences.
Ask who benefits, who provides care, and who bears the costs.	Assume care responsibilities are naturally or exclusively women's responsibility.
Investigate how public services, infrastructure, and social protection support care.	Frame care challenges solely as personal or household problems.
Highlight often-overlooked caregivers: older people, fathers, and people with disabilities.	Focus exclusively on mothers and children when discussing care.
Examine whether governments are meeting commitments related to childcare, health, water, sanitation, and social protection.	Report on care challenges without considering accountability or policy responses.

Reporting Through a Care Lens: Examples from West African Media

Journalists across West Africa are already using care-related issues to explore broader questions of economic participation, inequality, social protection, and development. Here are two examples from Ghana and Nigeria:

Unpaid Care Work in Ghana: The Silenced Gender Gap (*Ghana News Agency*) — Uses evidence on unpaid care work and time poverty to illustrate how unequal care responsibilities limit women's economic participation and opportunities.

Nigerian Women Losing \$111bn Through Unpaid Care Work (*The Whistler*) — Frames unpaid care work as a major economic issue, highlighting that Nigerian women contribute an estimated US\$111 billion annually in unpaid care work — a substantial and underrecognized economic gap.

Priority Actions

- 1 Use a care lens to strengthen reporting on issues you already cover, including water, employment, childcare, aging, migration, disability, infrastructure, and development, by examining how care responsibilities shape people's lives and opportunities.
- 2 Use data to reveal the hidden dimensions of care, drawing on Time Use Surveys, labor statistics, demographic data, and other evidence to explain how care influences economic participation, productivity, wellbeing, and development outcomes.
- 3 Connect individual experiences to broader systems and trends by pairing human-centered stories with data and expert perspectives.
- 4 Reframe care from a private household issue to a public policy and development issue by highlighting how public services, infrastructure, and policy decisions influence who provides care and who bears its costs.
- 5 Examine the economic implications of care by linking stories about water access, childcare, aging, and caregiving to labor force participation, income generation, productivity, and inequality.
- 6 Strengthen accountability reporting on care by investigating whether governments are meeting their commitments through investments in childcare, healthcare, water and sanitation, transport, and social protection.

Why This Matters Now

Growing inequalities, demographic change, and pressure on public services are making care a central development issue. The media is vital in shaping public perception, influencing political agendas, and connecting routine care experiences to broader social and economic issues.

At the same time, governments, researchers, and development actors are increasingly linking care to labor force participation, productivity, social protection, and economic growth, creating new opportunities for public debate and policy action.

For media professionals, this is a timely moment: as care becomes more visible in development and policy discussions, the question is no longer whether it should be part of the conversation, but how it is framed. Evidence-based reporting can explain how care shapes everyday experiences while also influencing labor force participation, economic opportunities, public services, and long-term development outcomes.

Learn More

Explore the full reference report, companion policy briefs developed for different audiences, and additional materials.



Elevating Unpaid Care Work as a Policy Priority in Francophone West and Central Africa. [More information about PRB's work on care](#)



(in English)



(en Français)

Explore Data and Analytical Tools



[National Transfer Accounts \(NTA\)-Country Briefs.](#)

Tracks economic production, consumption, and transfers across age groups.



[National Time Transfer Accounts \(NTTA\)](#)

Measures unpaid care and household work across generations.



[Budgeting Sensitive to Demographic Dividend](#)

Assesses whether budgets support demographic dividend priorities.



[Demographic Dividend Monitoring Index](#)

Tracks a country's readiness to achieve a demographic dividend.



[ILO-Measuring Unpaid Domestic and Care Work.](#)

Measures unpaid care and domestic work.

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1 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Time Use Across the World: Findings of a World Compilation of Time Use Surveys. New York: UNDP; 2015. <https://hdr.undp.org/content/time-use-across-world-findings-world-Compilation-time-use-surveys>.

2 Oxfam International. Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Global Inequality Crisis. Oxford: Oxfam International; 2020. <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstreams/c702c56-4287-4754-b474-878bc4f75c04/download>.

3 Kolovich, Lisa L., Monique Newiak, Melina Alarakhia, Zainab Sheikh Ahmed, and Tania Tanima. "Chapter 17. Gender Inequality and Care Work: Valuing and Investing in Care." In Gender Equality and Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund; 2024. <https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400246268.071.CH017>.

4 Aransiola, J. O., Akinyemi, A. I., Akinlo, A., Togonu-Bickesteeth, F. (2017). Grandparenting in Selected West African Countries: Implications for Health and Hygiene Behaviours in the Household. GrandFamilies: The Contemporary Journal of Research, Practice and Policy, 4 (1).DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/2067-3678.1050>

5 Thrive Child Evidence, "The Role of Grandmothers in Remote Rural Villages in Sierra Leone," Thrive Child Evidence, accessed June 10, 2026, <https://thrivechildevidence.org/updates/the-role-of-grandmothers-in-remote-rural-villages-in-sierra-leone>.