Undervalued and unprotected: Inside Kenya's paid childcare sector

At just 29, Jane (not her real name) carries a lifetime of scars from work she throught would offer her a future but has instead trapped her in cycles of exploitation, violence, and fear. Orphaned in her teens, she was sent from her rural home to Nairobi with the promise that a "good family" would educate her. Instead, she found herself doing domestic work: Cooking, cleaning, and caring for children for up to 16 hours a day, without pay, rest, or protection. Any mistakes she made were met with insults, beatings and threats.

As one would expect, Jane, then a teenager, tried to escape by changing employers, only to find the same pattern repeated: Extreme hours of work, less than Ksh5,000 a month as pay, no written contract, and constant verbal or physical abuse.

Marriage did not deliver safety either. It brought new forms of intimate partner violence. With children to feed and no savings, she returned to the only work available to her, low-paid childcare and domestic service in Kenyan homes, where the line between employment and exploitation is dangerously thin.

Jane's experience is far from unique. According to a 2024 baseline study conducted by the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) for the Action for Paid Childcare Sector Transformation (ACT) project in Kenya and Malawi, 75.8 percent of childcare workers in Kenya earn below Ksh10,000 per month. This is below the national minimum wage of Ksh16,113 for domestic workers. To put this into perspective, of the respondents, only 13 percent reported that their income was enough to meet basic expenses, leaving most constantly exposed to economic shocks and coercion.

The study also revealed that childcare work is highly feminised, with 95 percent of paid childcare workers in Kenya being women, most of them young adults between 18 and 35.

A 2024 capacity assessment survey on the paid childcare ecosystem in Nairobi, Kisumu, and Kakamega, conducted by the Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW), paints an equally stark picture. According to the study, over 88 percent of childcare workers lack formal contracts, 70 percent have not received any training on how to prevent or respond to sexual and gender-based violence, 59 percent are unaware of existing childcare policies, and 75 percent lack access to financial services, with only two percent using formal banking.

Despite this, Kenyan parents express strong satisfaction with childcare. WUSC's baseline revealed that 88.2 percent of Kenyan parents are satisfied with the quality of paid childcare services, demonstrating the contradiction at the heart of this sector. Women like Jane are indispensable, yet they remain invisible.

Unfortunately, this contradiction does not apply to Kenya alone. A gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) technical brief titled ***"From Local Realities to Global Lessons"***, produced under the ACT project, compares Kenya and Malawi to other African countries such as Ghana, Ethiopia, Senegal, Uganda, and Mozambique.

Representatives of World University Service of Canada, the Coalition on Violence Against Women, and the Women's Legal Resources Centre during an ACT Project Knowledge Exchange Forum held in Nairobi in October 2025. PHOTO | COVAW

An ACT Project community dialogue in Nairobi, in 2025. PHOTO | COVAW

According to this GESI brief, Ghana has one of the most dynamic emerging private childcare markets in West Africa, with an expanding network of centre-based care. However, quality remains constrained by weak regulation and reliance on household fees.

Ethiopia, on the other hand, has invested in a stronger pre-primary framework, with accredited early childhood programmes and short professional courses for caregivers, though services for children under three remain largely informal.

The same study showcases promising models in Rwanda and South Africa. Rwanda's national standards, short accredited training programmes, and government-supported community childcare centres, have helped raise the status and skills of childcare workers. South Africa's public subsidies to community-based early childhood centres, combined with clear licensing and staff-to-child ratios, demonstrate how targeted public investment can stabilise a sector that would otherwise rely on underpaid labour from poor women.

> **The ACT Project is now supporting hundreds of women to understand their rights, organise into collectives, and demand safer, better-paid childcare work, driving the transformation of a sector that Kenya depends on, yet has long undervalued."**

Put together, these examples show that Kenya has a clear roadmap for success if it chooses it: Set national standards, expand accredited training, and invest public resources so that childcare is recognised as essential social infrastructure, and not an afterthought.

The ACT project, which is being funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by WUSC as the lead partner, COVAW, and other partners, aims to push Kenya in that direction. Its goal is to transform paid childcare from a job of last resort into a professional, equitable sector by improving wages and working conditions, strengthening worker networks, and expanding access to finance for women-led childcare enterprises.

Kenya is making significant strides in recognising the care economy as a key driver of social and economic development. At the national level, the draft National Care Policy 2025 aims to formalise caregiving and early childhood development, ensuring that care work is no longer invisible but central to national planning. In Nairobi, the county government, in collaboration with key stakeholders such as COVAW, has been developing the Childcare Facilities Regulations to guide the effective management of childcare services within the county.

The ACT Project is playing a pivotal role in this shift. By supporting the development of regulatory frameworks, facilitating capacity-building for childcare providers, advocating for quality standards, and promoting social and financial support for women caregivers, ACT is contributing directly to a more sustainable and equitable care economy.

The combined efforts of national policy, county regulation, and targeted projects like ACT are redefining care work in Kenya, transforming it from invisible domestic labour to a recognised, regulated, and valued part of the country's economic and social infrastructure.

For Jane, the turning point came when she attended a community dialogue organised under ACT, where she learned that the violence and harassment she had faced were not "just part of the job" or "her fault", but violations she could report. The project is now supporting hundreds of women to understand their rights, organise into collectives, and demand safer, better-paid childcare work, driving the transformation of a sector that Kenya depends on, yet has long undervalued.

As Kenya advances its care economy, this is the moment to match progress with bold legal reform. The government's ongoing efforts must now be anchored in stronger protections for the care workers who sustain homes, families, and the productivity of the nation. This includes the long-overdue ratification of ILO Convention 189, which guarantees domestic workers fair wages, written contracts, rest periods, and social protection, rights that remain elusive for most paid childcare and domestic workers in Kenya. Equally urgent is the ratification of ILO Convention 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work. President William Ruto has repeatedly affirmed Kenya's commitment to gender equality, safe workplaces, and the dignity of labour. Advancing these ratifications would transform those commitments into action. By aligning with international labour standards, Kenya would send a powerful signal that care work is not casual labour but essential, skilled work deserving of protection, respect, and fair compensation.