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Childcare as Gender-Responsive Labor Infrastructure for Low-Wage Women: A Scoping Review

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Systematic Review

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Abstract

Childcare is often treated as a household welfare concern or as an early childhood service, yet for low-wage women it can also operate as a decisive condition for entry into, retention in, and benefit from paid employment. This scoping review maps how the literature links childcare access with women's labor-force participation, work–family reconciliation, gender equality, and decent work. The review followed a scoping-review logic informed by established methodological guidance. The search identified 139 records. After excluding publications, 27 studies were included for thematic charting. Data were organized around concepts, access dimensions, support models, outcomes, and gaps. The evidence indicates childcare is increasingly connected to employment, time allocation, labor reform, fertility policy, family-friendly work, and women's wellbeing. However, the literature remains uneven. Stronger evidence comes from high-income and welfare-state contexts, while fewer studies center low-wage, informal, blue-collar, migrant, or shift-working women. Across contexts, childcare access is multidimensional: affordability, location, operating hours, quality, safety, trust, and continuity between parental leave and early childhood education all shape whether services are usable. Public childcare, vouchers, in-kind benefits, employer support, and community-based arrangements each address different parts of the care-work conflict, but none is sufficient without attention to local labor conditions and social norms. This review contributes by reframing childcare as gender-responsive labor infrastructure. It clarifies that childcare policy is not peripheral to decent work but central to inclusive employment systems, particularly for women whose income, schedule control, and bargaining power are limited.

Research Highlights

- Childcare is reframed as labor infrastructure for gender-equitable decent work.
- Low-wage women face barriers of cost, distance, quality, trust, and time.
- Care policy must match real work schedules, not merely expand service supply.
- Public, workplace, and community models address different childcare gaps.
- Evidence gaps persist for blue-collar, informal, migrant, and urban workers.

1. Introduction

Childcare has traditionally been discussed as a private family arrangement, a child-welfare service, or an early childhood education resource. This review begins from a different premise: for many women, especially those in low-wage work, childcare is a condition of labor-market access. When care is unavailable, unaffordable, unsafe, distant, or incompatible with working hours, paid work becomes difficult to enter and harder to sustain. Research on pension reform in Italy shows how inadequate childcare infrastructure can undermine labor reforms because families, particularly women, are expected to absorb care gaps (Coda Moscarola et al., 2016). Cross-national work on female labor-force participation similarly shows that women's employment is shaped by structural and territorial conditions, not by individual motivation alone (Sahin, 2025).

Low-wage women face a distinctive version of the work–care problem. Their work is often characterized by limited bargaining power, inflexible schedules, unstable hours, low income, and weak access to employer-provided benefits. Studies of discouraged workers show that labor-market exclusion is hidden within intersecting disadvantages, including gender, income insecurity, and household constraints (Lee & Kang, 2026). Work on patriarchal welfare systems also shows that unpaid female care labor can operate as a silent reserve that sustains social policy while restricting women's formal employment opportunities (Wang & Liu, 2020).

The urgency of this problem increases when family, fertility, and employment policies are misaligned. Evidence from China's Universal Two-Child Policy shows that fertility expansion reduced women's labor-force participation by 4.7 percentage points and reallocated labor within households in gendered ways (Dong & Li, 2025). Research on Croatia identifies a care gap between the end of paid parental leave and access to early childhood education and care, creating a policy discontinuity that can disrupt parents' return to work (Simčić, 2025). These studies demonstrate that childcare cannot be analyzed only as a family service; it must be examined as part of the institutional architecture that shapes women's participation in paid work.

Childcare barriers are also occupationally specific. Women in demanding occupations experience parenting stress when job demands, shift patterns, and childcare responsibilities collide (Hwang et al., 2025). Professional women in Japan continue to confront cultural and organizational constraints around women's advancement, indicating that formal employment does not automatically eliminate gendered care expectations (Iida, 2024). Although these studies involve professional or semi-professional groups, their implications are more severe for low-wage workers, who usually possess fewer financial resources and less control over schedules.

The literature further indicates that childcare access is not reducible to the number of facilities. Subsidized daycare programs in Greece illustrate how childcare support can be linked to mothers' labor participation and family–work reconciliation, while also showing regional variation in access (Siriopoulos & Kassapi, 2023). Malaysian evidence on family-friendly work conditions demonstrates that workplace arrangements can affect women's physical and mental wellbeing when paid and unpaid work compete (Mat Pozian et al., 2024). Together, these studies suggest that childcare must be understood as multidimensional: affordability, availability, distance, quality, trust, safety, operating hours, age eligibility, and policy continuity all matter.

The care economy provides the broader intellectual context for this review. Childcare is one part of the social reproduction system that sustains labor markets by enabling adults to engage in paid work. Research on India's care workforce positions care as both reproductive labor and labor-market activity, showing that care is not outside the economy but embedded within it (Dungdung, 2018). Macro-policy modeling in South Korea similarly treats child and elderly care as a gendered economic-policy issue linked to labor supply, fertility, wage gaps, and household welfare (Cicowiez & Lofgren, 2023).

Evidence from early childhood education and care also points to the importance of governance scale. Subnational analysis in Italy shows that public and subsidized childcare development varies sharply across regions, making local service capacity crucial for access (Da Roit et al., 2019). Comparative European work shows that female employment and family care are shaped by the interaction between policy structures and cultural norms (Naldini et al., 2016). These findings are important for low- and middle-income urban contexts, where national commitments may not translate into accessible services in neighborhoods, industrial zones, or commuting corridors.

Informal and working-class women are particularly important for this review. Research from Africa documents women informal workers' demand for childcare as part of economic empowerment and social protection, shifting the discussion from individual entrepreneurship toward public services (Moussié & Alfers, 2018). Qualitative evidence from Guangzhou shows that limited public childcare and costly private care increased reliance on grandmothers and shaped women's employment and childbirth decisions (Zhong & Peng, 2020). These studies reveal that families often compensate for weak formal services through unpaid intergenerational care, but such arrangements can reproduce gendered burdens across households.

The purpose of this scoping review is to map how existing literature conceptualizes childcare as a support mechanism for women's employment, work–family reconciliation, gender equality, and decent work. The review asks: how has childcare been conceptualized as a support for women's employment and gender equality; what access dimensions are most frequently discussed in relation to low-wage women's work; what policy, workplace, and community models are reported; what outcomes are associated with childcare access; and what evidence gaps remain for informal, blue-collar, urban, and low- and middle-income contexts. Adjacent literature on family policy, work-life balance, and SDG 5 indicates that childcare must be treated as part of a wider system of social protection and organizational equality (Hagiwara, 2025; Garcia et al., 2025).

This review contributes to scholarship by reframing childcare as gender-responsive labor infrastructure. This framing avoids overclaiming the effectiveness of any single childcare intervention and instead maps the concepts, models, outcomes, and gaps that structure the field. It also contributes to policy by clarifying why low-wage women require childcare systems that are affordable, physically accessible, safe, trusted, high quality, and compatible with real working schedules. The review therefore connects care economy theory, gendered labor markets, work–family reconciliation, and decent work within a single evidence map.

2. Methods

Scoping review methodology was selected because the evidence base on childcare, women's employment, gender equality, and decent work is broad, interdisciplinary, and conceptually heterogeneous. Scoping studies are appropriate for examining the extent, range, and nature of research activity and for identifying gaps in a field rather than estimating pooled effects (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Methodological enhancements to scoping reviews emphasize clear research questions, iterative study selection, transparent data charting, and meaningful synthesis (Levac et al., 2010).

The review design was also informed by PRISMA-ScR and JBI guidance. PRISMA-ScR provides reporting standards for objectives, eligibility criteria, information sources, search strategy, screening, data charting, and synthesis (Tricco et al., 2018). Guidance on choosing between systematic and scoping reviews supports the use of a scoping approach when the aim is to clarify concepts, map evidence characteristics, and identify knowledge gaps (Munn et al., 2018). JBI guidance further supports the use of population, concept, and context elements in defining review scope (Peters et al., 2024).

2.1 Search Strategy

Scopus served as the main database because it covers social policy, gender studies, labor studies, economics, public administration, public health, education, and development studies. The search was intentionally broad to capture childcare literature that may not use the terms low-wage, blue-collar, or informal work explicitly. The search string used in Scopus was: TITLE-ABS-KEY (("daycare" OR "childcare center*" OR "childcare support" OR "care services") AND ("female worker*" OR women OR mother* OR "working women") AND ("labor force participation" OR employment OR "work participation" OR workforce) AND ("decent work" OR wellbeing OR welfare OR "work-life balance")).

The search identified 139 records. Search results were exported into reference-management software, and duplicate removal was performed before screening. No duplicate records were identified. The search strategy was complemented by reference checking and methodological literature on scoping reviews to support transparent reporting and extraction. Because studies in this field often use adjacent terms such as family-friendly work, care policy, early childhood education and care, maternal employment, or work-life balance, the screening process retained records when childcare was linked substantively to women's employment or work–family reconciliation (Colquhoun et al., 2014; Peters et al., 2015).

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Records were included when they addressed childcare, daycare, early childhood care, care services, or family-support policies in relation to women's employment, maternal labor participation, work–family reconciliation, gender equality, decent work, or care-related barriers. Eligible studies included empirical, conceptual, theoretical, policy, and review-oriented work. The population of interest was low-wage women, but broader studies were included where they offered evidence relevant to women with constrained resources, limited schedule control, informal employment, shift work, or weak workplace support.

Records were excluded when they focused only on child development outcomes without a clear connection to parental employment or gender equality. Studies were also excluded when they addressed education policy without childcare relevance, professional work–family issues without transferable

evidence for broader women workers, or service use without connection to care, employment, or gendered labor. In addition, records older than 2015 were excluded during screening unless they were methodological anchors or theoretically important to the review. A total of 46 records were excluded because they were older than 2015. Of the remaining 93 reports sought for retrieval, 75 were retained after limiting by article type and English language, and 48 were excluded as out of scope.

2.3 Screening, Selection, and Data Charting

Screening proceeded through title and abstract review, followed by full-text eligibility assessment. Twenty-seven studies were included in the final thematic charting. The data-charting form extracted author, year, country or region, study design, population, sector, childcare concept, access dimension, policy model, responsible actor, outcome reported, measurement approach, and evidence limitation. Recent guidance on extraction and presentation in scoping reviews informed the organization of results into thematic tables (Pollock et al., 2023).

Formal risk-of-bias assessment was not used to exclude studies because the purpose of a scoping review is to map evidence rather than adjudicate intervention effectiveness. However, methodological characteristics were charted to distinguish quasi-experimental policy studies, cross-sectional surveys, qualitative studies, macroeconomic models, policy analyses, historical studies, and comparative welfare analyses. This distinction was important because evidence on childcare may take the form of causal estimates, policy modeling, service-access analysis, conceptual argument, or qualitative accounts of work–care negotiation (Dong & Li, 2025; Lee & Lim, 2024).

Occupational and workplace studies were retained when they illuminated childcare compatibility or work–family conflict, even if daycare was not the only support examined. For instance, evidence on nurses with young children helps identify how irregular shifts and job demands shape parenting stress (Hwang et al., 2025). Evidence on family-friendly work conditions in Malaysia helps connect workplace support to women's wellbeing and unpaid care pressures (Mat Pozian et al., 2024). These studies were charted because low-wage women often face the same tensions under more constrained material conditions. The screening flow and intended figure placement are shown in Fig. 1, which should appear immediately after this paragraph.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1 Childcare, Social Reproduction, and the Care Economy

The theoretical foundation of this review is the care economy. Childcare is not only a service consumed by families; it is part of the social reproduction system that sustains labor markets. When children are cared for safely and reliably, caregivers can engage in paid employment, training, education, or job search. When childcare is absent, the time cost of care is usually transferred to women. The patriarchal welfare-system literature shows how women's unpaid care contributions can remain hidden while enabling social-policy systems to function (Wang & Liu, 2020).

Care work also has a dual character: it is reproductive labor that sustains life, and it is paid labor when organized through markets or public services. The emergence of care work as a labor-market sector in India demonstrates that care is not outside the economy but embedded in changing employment relations (Dungdung, 2018). The business of care in London further shows that paid care markets are stratified by gender, class, and migration status, which means that childcare expansion must consider both women who need care and women who provide it (Farris, 2020).

Middle-income welfare-regime analysis strengthens this argument by showing that unpaid family work must be included in fiscal and social-policy analysis (Nakray, 2024). Familialism in elderly-care systems also demonstrates how public policy can sustain reliance on families, especially women, when formal provision remains weak (Žalimienė et al., 2020). Although this review focuses on childcare, these wider care studies help explain why care responsibilities cannot be treated as private household matters.

Figure 2 shows the theoretical framework that connects childcare provision with social reproduction, gendered labor-market structures, work–family reconciliation, and decent-work outcomes. The figure positions unpaid childcare, household labor, eldercare, and emotional labor as foundational forms of social reproduction that sustain families and labor markets but remain disproportionately assigned to women. It further shows how low wages, insecure contracts, limited flexibility, shift work, informal employment, and weak worker protection intensify care-related barriers for women, particularly low-wage workers. Within this structure, childcare is conceptualized as gender-responsive labor infrastructure because it redistributes care responsibilities through affordable services, accessible locations, flexible hours, quality and safety standards, and shared institutional responsibility. This framing is consistent with evidence showing that women's paid work is shaped by care systems, welfare arrangements, and time-use constraints rather than individual preference alone (Wang & Liu, 2020; Lee & Lim, 2024). Figure 2 therefore supports the central theoretical argument of this review: childcare is not peripheral to labor policy but is a mediating infrastructure through which gender equality, employment continuity, income security, occupational dignity, wellbeing, and equal opportunity become more attainable for low-wage women.

3.2 Gendered Labor Markets and Work–Family Reconciliation

Gendered labor markets are organized around expectations of availability, mobility, and continuity. These expectations disadvantage workers with caregiving responsibilities and become especially punitive when jobs offer little flexibility. Comparative European research shows that care policies and cultural expectations jointly shape women's employment (Naldini et al., 2016). Research on contested care needs in Norway further shows that even welfare-state contexts may retain gendered negotiations over care responsibilities (Sundsbø et al., 2023).

Work–family reconciliation therefore requires more than rhetorical support for women's employment. It involves aligning childcare services, leave policies, workplace norms, and household expectations. Grandparental childcare across Europe varies with policy context and working mothers' needs, indicating

that families compensate differently depending on public supports and work conditions (Bordone et al., 2017). Evidence from Guangzhou similarly shows that reliance on grandmothers can become a substitute for public childcare when private care is expensive or public care is limited (Zhong & Peng, 2020).

The time mechanism is central. Public daycare and child allowances operate through different channels: direct service provision can reduce time constraints more directly than cash transfers (Hagiwara, 2025). Korea's free childcare policy affected women's time allocation by increasing working hours among married women with preschool children and expanding free time among full-time housewives (Lee & Lim, 2024). These findings support a theoretical framework that treats unpaid time, paid work, and public service provision as interdependent.

3.3 Decent Work, Gender Equality, and Childcare as Public Value

Decent work is more than employment. It includes income, security, dignity, rights, equal opportunity, and compatibility between work and life responsibilities. Childcare contributes to decent work when it enables women to remain employed, avoid absenteeism, reduce stress, and maintain income. Pension-reform evidence from Italy shows that weak childcare supply can increase women's sick leave, revealing how labor-market reforms can fail when care infrastructure is inadequate (Coda Moscarola et al., 2016). Gendered care modeling in South Korea suggests that care expansion can influence labor supply, welfare, fertility, and gender wage gaps (Cicowiez & Lofgren, 2023).

Gender equality at work also requires organizational and institutional systems that reduce care-related barriers. Corporate support for SDG 5 is associated with diversity targets, female representation, and work-life balance practices (Garcia et al., 2025). However, voluntary organizational practices may not reach low-wage or informal workers. Evidence from women informal workers in Africa demonstrates that childcare is a demand for public services and social protection rather than merely a matter of employer goodwill (Moussié & Alfers, 2018).

Wellbeing is also part of decent work. Mothers' mental health varies by employment status and social support, indicating that work and care interact psychosocially (Aydın et al., 2025). Gendered and devalued work is associated with adverse health outcomes among marginalized women, which supports a dignity-based view of decent work (Kim & Peterson, 2020). These studies expand the childcare debate beyond labor-force participation to include mental health, social support, dignity, and safety.

3.4 Debates and Controversies in Childcare Policy for Low-Wage Women

Several debates recur across the evidence base. The first is whether childcare should be universal or targeted. Universal systems can reduce stigma and expand broad access, but targeted subsidies may be needed to reach low-income women quickly. The second debate concerns public provision versus

private delivery. Private services may expand supply, but costly private childcare can exclude low-wage workers. This problem is visible in China, where expensive private care and limited public services increased reliance on family care (Zhong & Peng, 2020).

The third debate concerns employer responsibility. Employer-supported childcare and family-friendly work conditions can reduce work–family conflict, but such benefits often reach formal and professional workers first. Evidence from radiology professionals shows that access, affordability, and quality remain significant problems even in high-status occupations (Averill et al., 2025). Post-pandemic remote work also cannot substitute for care provision, particularly for blue-collar and informal women whose jobs cannot be performed at home (Recchi et al., 2025).

The fourth debate concerns geography and local governance. Commute distance affects gender diversity in public service, suggesting that spatial arrangements shape women's employment access (Kaaua & Virudachalam, 2025). Subnational variation in childcare development demonstrates that local governance capacity and service distribution matter as much as national policy commitments (Da Roit et al., 2019). For low-wage women, a childcare place that is theoretically available but too far from home, workplace, or transport route may not be usable.

4. Review of Findings

The 27 included studies were organized into four themes: conceptualizing childcare as gender-responsive labor infrastructure; access, affordability, quality, and service compatibility; policy, workplace, and community support models; and reported outcomes, evidence gaps, and research readiness. The review did not treat childcare as a single intervention with uniform effects. Instead, it mapped how studies define childcare, which populations they include, which service barriers they identify, what institutional models they examine, and what outcomes they report.

4.1 Conceptualizing Childcare as Gender-Responsive Labor Infrastructure

The first theme shows that childcare is increasingly linked to labor-force participation, job retention, work–family reconciliation, and gender equality. Studies in this theme do not always use the phrase labor infrastructure, but they show that care services shape the feasibility of paid work. In Italy, weak childcare supply undermined the effectiveness of pension reform by increasing sick leave among low-income grandmothers (Coda Moscarola et al., 2016). Cross-national evidence similarly situates female labor-force participation within structural and territorial contexts (Sahin, 2025).

Several studies also show how unpaid care labor is embedded in welfare and labor systems. Women's hidden contributions to Chinese social policy demonstrate that welfare systems may depend on unpaid care without recognizing it as labor (Wang & Liu, 2020). India's care-work literature makes reproductive labor visible as a labor-market issue rather than a purely domestic activity (Dungdung, 2018). Table 1

summarizes this conceptual evidence and shows that the literature increasingly connects childcare with employment, but still under-centers low-wage women as the primary analytical population.

Table 1
Essential summary of findings on childcare as gender-responsive labor infrastructure

Reference	Context/design	Population	Core finding	Evidence gap
Coda Moscarola et al., 2016	Italy; empirical labor-policy analysis	Older employed women and grandmothers	Weak childcare supply turned pension reform into higher sick leave among low-income grandmothers.	Younger low-wage mothers and workplace childcare remain underexplored.
Sahin, 2025	Cross-national; Bayesian analysis	Female labor force	Labor participation varies with institutional, ecological, territorial, and decent-work conditions.	Childcare is not isolated as a specific infrastructure component.
Wang & Liu, 2020	China; gendered welfare analysis	Women as hidden welfare contributors	Unpaid care is positioned as invisible labor sustaining welfare systems.	Childcare is embedded in welfare critique but not charted systematically.
Dong & Li, 2025	China; difference-in-differences	Households under fertility policy	Fertility expansion reduced women's labor-force participation by 4.7 percentage points.	Formal daycare is not tested as a corrective mechanism.
Cicowiez & Lofgren, 2023	South Korea; care-focused CGE model	Women, households, care sectors	Care expansion is modeled as a lever for labor supply and gender wage-gap reduction.	Model-based evidence needs empirical validation among low-wage workers.
Dungdung, 2018	India; conceptual labor analysis	Care workforce	Care work is conceptualized as social reproduction and labor-market activity.	More evidence is needed on childcare users and service access.
Lee & Lim, 2024	South Korea; time-use analysis	Married women with preschool children	Free childcare increased working hours and altered unpaid/free time.	Distributional effects for informal and shift workers are unclear.
Moussié & Alfers, 2018	Sub-Saharan Africa; policy analysis	Women informal workers	Childcare is framed as a public-service and social-protection demand.	Implementation, financing, and quality evidence remain limited.
Nakray, 2024	Middle-income countries; welfare analysis	Women in middle-income welfare regimes	Gender-sensitive policy must account for unpaid family care and fiscal design.	Daycare models for low-wage women are not detailed.

Studies on fertility policy and care-focused macroeconomic modeling further support this framing. China's Universal Two-Child Policy reduced women's labor-force participation, indicating that reproductive policy can deepen gendered labor inequality when childcare remains insufficient (Dong & Li, 2025). Care-policy modeling in South Korea positions child and elderly care as a macroeconomic lever that can influence labor supply and gender wage gaps (Cicowiez & Lofgren, 2023). The concept of gender-responsive labor infrastructure therefore captures a cross-cutting insight: childcare organizes the boundary between unpaid care and paid work.

Figure 3 shows the conceptual progression from childcare as a private family responsibility to childcare as gender-responsive labor infrastructure. The left panel represents the conventional arrangement in which mothers, grandmothers, and relatives absorb childcare responsibilities through unpaid and informal care. This arrangement often makes care invisible to labor markets and public institutions, while constraining women's employment opportunities. The middle panel illustrates transitional policy framings, where childcare begins to enter public agendas through social welfare, early childhood education, parental support, and family policy. The right panel presents the advanced framing proposed in this review: childcare as a public and institutional system that enables decent work, employment continuity, gender equality, social protection, and local governance. This conceptual reclassification is important because studies on informal women workers, welfare regimes, and care policy demonstrate that childcare must be treated as a shared responsibility involving states, employers, communities, families, and markets (Moussié & Alfers, 2018; Nakray, 2024). Figure 3 therefore clarifies the article's key contribution: the review does not merely map daycare availability, but reframes childcare as a structural labor-market condition that supports women's inclusion in paid work.

4.2 Access, Affordability, Quality, and Service Compatibility for Low-Wage Women

The second theme shows that childcare access is multidimensional. Availability alone is insufficient when services are unaffordable, distant, mistrusted, low quality, unsafe, or incompatible with working hours. Nurses with young children in South Korea illustrate the importance of schedule compatibility because irregular shifts and high job demands intensify parenting stress (Hwang et al., 2025). Voucher-based daycare in Greece demonstrates that affordability and regional eligibility shape family–work reconciliation (Siriopoulos & Kassapi, 2023).

Continuity across the life course is another access dimension. A gap between paid parental leave and early childhood education and care can disrupt employment transitions, especially for families unable to purchase private care (Simčić, 2025). Regional analysis in Italy shows that local supply matters because public and subsidized daycare take-up varies significantly within the same national system (Da Roit et al., 2019). These findings are summarized in Table 2, which organizes barriers by affordability, eligibility, geography, operating hours, and quality.

Figure 4 shows that childcare access is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to the presence or absence of daycare facilities. The figure places low-wage women's work–family reconciliation at the

center and identifies six interacting access dimensions: affordability, availability, geographic accessibility, operating-hour compatibility, quality and safety, and trust or cultural acceptability. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing. For example, a daycare service may be available but unaffordable, nearby but of uncertain quality, trusted but too far away, or affordable but incompatible with night work, shift work, or long working hours. The figure also shows why low-wage women are especially affected: they often have less schedule control, lower income, fewer savings, limited employer benefits, and greater dependence on affordable local services. Evidence from childcare voucher programs, regional childcare variation, care gaps after parental leave, and informal reliance on grandparents confirms that access barriers are shaped by cost, local supply, timing, and policy design (Siriopoulos & Kassapi, 2023; Simčić, 2025). Figure 4 therefore strengthens the review's argument that childcare policy must address multiple access dimensions simultaneously to support sustained employment and reduce work–family conflict among low-wage women.

Table 2
Essential summary of findings on childcare access dimensions and service barriers for low-wage women

Reference	Context/population	Access barrier	Employment implication	Policy relevance
Hwang et al., 2025	South Korea; nurses with young children	Irregular shifts and job demands make standard childcare difficult.	Parenting stress may threaten wellbeing and career stability.	Services should respond to nonstandard and intensive work patterns.
Siriopoulos & Kassapi, 2023	Greece; daycare voucher users	Access depends on subsidy criteria and regional eligibility.	Daycare support is tied to family–work reconciliation.	Subsidies should be monitored for territorial equity.
Simčić, 2025	Croatia; parents after paid leave	A gap emerges between paid leave and ECEC eligibility.	Return to work can be delayed or destabilized.	Leave and childcare eligibility should be sequenced.
Da Roit et al., 2019	Italy; regional ECEC analysis	Public/subsidized daycare take-up differs across regions.	Uneven local supply creates unequal employment opportunities.	City and regional service capacity must be assessed.
Bordone et al., 2017	Europe; working mothers and grandparents	Families rely on grandparental care when formal care is insufficient.	Informal care can support work but reproduce unpaid family burdens.	Formal care should reduce overdependence on kin care.
Zhong & Peng, 2020	China; urban mothers and grandmothers	Limited public care and costly private care push families toward grandmothers.	Employment and childbirth decisions become constrained.	Public childcare should reduce family-based care pressure.
Averill et al., 2025	United States; radiology professionals	Access, affordability, and quality remain barriers.	Childcare gaps affect professional responsibilities.	Access problems are likely sharper for low-wage women.
Mat Pozian et al., 2024	Malaysia; working women	Family-friendly work conditions are unevenly accessible.	Work supports affect physical and mental wellbeing.	Low-wage women may need regulatory protection.
Coda Moscarola et al., 2016	Italy; low-income grandmothers	Scarce childcare and care services raise stress and absenteeism.	Care scarcity can undermine employment stability.	Labor reform should be paired with care facilities.

Informal care appears repeatedly as a coping strategy. Grandparental childcare across Europe varies with policy context and working mothers' needs (Bordone et al., 2017). In Guangzhou, limited public care and costly private services increased reliance on grandmothers while shaping women's employment and childbirth decisions (Zhong & Peng, 2020). These findings matter for low-wage women because family care can be helpful but unstable, unpaid, and gendered across generations.

4.3 Policy, Workplace, and Community Models of Childcare Support

The third theme maps support models. Public childcare, daycare vouchers, in-kind childcare benefits, family-friendly workplaces, and community-based care each address different aspects of the care-work conflict. Free childcare in South Korea increased working hours among married women with preschool children, suggesting that direct service support can change time allocation (Lee & Lim, 2024). In-kind childcare benefits may also reduce time costs in ways that cash transfers do not fully address (Hagiwara, 2025).

Figure 5 shows the ecosystem of childcare-support models available for low-wage women, organized into four major domains: public provision, financial support, workplace support, and community or co-produced models. Public provision includes state-funded daycare, municipal childcare centers, universal or targeted services, and regulation of quality standards. Financial support includes vouchers, subsidies, cash benefits, tax relief, and fee reduction. Workplace support includes employer-sponsored daycare, flexible work arrangements, breastfeeding facilities, leave alignment, and family-friendly policies. Community and co-produced models include cooperatives, neighborhood-based childcare, union-supported services, and partnerships among local government, employers, civil society, and communities. The figure also makes clear that each model has strengths and limitations. Public provision may face fiscal and capacity constraints, subsidies may not solve supply shortages, employer-based support may exclude informal workers, and community models may face sustainability and quality-control problems. This synthesis reflects evidence that childcare policy operates through combined welfare, workplace, and community arrangements rather than a single institutional mechanism (Bordone et al., 2017; Mat Pozian et al., 2024). Figure 5 therefore supports the practical implication that effective childcare policy for low-wage women requires coordinated governance rather than isolated program design.

Subsidized daycare vouchers provide another model. The Greek voucher program offers a structured mechanism to reduce childcare cost, but regional variation and eligibility rules can limit equity (Siriopoulos & Kassapi, 2023). Policy alignment is also critical: care gaps between paid leave and early childhood education show that childcare models must be integrated with parental leave and return-to-work pathways (Simčić, 2025). Table 3 presents these models and identifies responsible actors, strengths, limitations, and relevance for low-wage women.

Workplace and community models are important but uneven. Family-friendly work conditions can support wellbeing, yet access may vary by job type, seniority, and sector (Mat Pozian et al., 2024).

Informal workers' demand for childcare demonstrates that employer-based models are insufficient for women outside formal employment (Moussié & Alfers, 2018). In fragile settings, gender-sensitive care policy may also become part of crisis recovery and social-protection design (AbuMezied & Sawafta, 2022). Historical evidence from Hungary further indicates that women's paid work has long depended on state approaches to childcare and institutional care (Varsa, 2017). These findings suggest that low-wage women need mixed systems involving public financing, local coordination, worker organizations, employers, and community providers.

Table 3
Essential summary of findings on childcare policy, workplace, and community support models

Reference	Support model/actor	Target group	Reported strength	Limitation/relevance
Siriopoulos & Kassapi, 2023	Subsidized daycare vouchers; EU/national-regional actors	Eligible mothers	Reduces direct childcare cost and supports reconciliation.	Eligibility and regional differences can limit equity.
Lee & Lim, 2024	Free childcare; national government	Married women with preschool children	Increased working hours and supported work–family balance.	Effects across income and employment types need study.
Cicowiez & Lofgren, 2023	Expansion of child and elderly care; national government	Households, women, care workers	Links care services to labor supply, welfare, and wage gaps.	Model assumptions require implementation evidence.
Hagiwara, 2025	In-kind childcare versus cash; national government	Parents and households	Direct services reduce time costs more directly than cash.	Local access and quality barriers may remain.
Simčić, 2025	Leave–ECEC policy alignment; welfare/education systems	Parents returning to work	Highlights continuous care-policy sequencing.	Focuses on timing more than affordability or quality.
Bordone et al., 2017	Formal policy plus grandparental care; welfare states/families	Working mothers and grandparents	Shows how formal and informal care combine.	Informal care may reinforce gendered family burdens.
Mat Pozian et al., 2024	Family-friendly work conditions; employers	Working women	Links workplace support with wellbeing under care pressure.	Employer discretion may exclude low-wage workers.
AbuMezied & Sawafta, 2022	Gender-sensitive care policy during crisis; state/humanitarian actors	Women in fragile settings	Places care in crisis recovery and social protection.	Weak capacity and budgets limit implementation.
Moussié & Alfers, 2018	Public services and social protection; governments and worker organizations	Women informal workers	Centers informal women workers' childcare demands.	Service model and financing evidence remain thin.
Varsa, 2017	State institutional care; historical state institutions	Women entering paid work	Shows long-standing links between	Historical setting limits direct transferability.

Reference	Support model/actor	Target group	Reported strength	Limitation/relevance
			women's work and state care.	

4.4 Reported Outcomes, Evidence Gaps, and Research Readiness

The fourth theme concerns outcomes and gaps. Reported outcomes include labor-force participation, working hours, free time, absenteeism, parenting stress, wellbeing, daycare participation, grandparental care, and work–family reconciliation. The strongest outcome-oriented studies use quasi-experimental or comparative designs. China's fertility-policy evidence identifies a measurable reduction in women's labor participation after policy change (Dong & Li, 2025). Korea's free childcare evidence identifies changes in time use and working hours (Lee & Lim, 2024).

Other studies illuminate mechanisms rather than causal effects. Parenting stress among nurses shows how childcare incompatibility interacts with job demands (Hwang et al., 2025). Family-friendly work conditions in Malaysia connect employment arrangements with physical and mental wellbeing (Mat Pozian et al., 2024). Regional early childhood education and care studies explain why local capacity and policy design shape service take-up even before employment outcomes are measured (Da Roit et al., 2019). Table 4 summarizes reported outcomes, measurement approaches, limitations, and future research implications.

The evidence base remains uneven. Professional and high-income groups receive attention, as shown by studies of radiology and surgical training (Averill et al., 2025; Rangel et al., 2018). Remote work and workplace-support studies are useful, but they have limited transferability to blue-collar, informal, and service-sector women whose work cannot be relocated to the home (Recchi et al., 2025). The evidence is also geographically uneven, with limited research centering low- and middle-income urban labor markets. Adjacent studies on women's service access and wellbeing in low- and middle-income contexts indicate the importance of autonomy, service availability, and financial protection, but they rarely connect these dimensions directly to childcare and paid work (Dahal et al., 2023; Jafaei et al., 2025).

Table 4
Essential summary of findings on reported outcomes, evidence gaps, and research readiness

Reference	Outcome	Main finding	Limitation	Future research implication
Dong & Li, 2025	Labor-force participation and household labor supply	Universal Two-Child Policy reduced women's labor participation by 4.7 percentage points.	Childcare provision is not isolated as the intervention.	Test whether formal childcare buffers fertility-related employment penalties.
Lee & Lim, 2024	Working hours and free time	Free childcare increased working hours among married women with preschool children.	Low-income and nonstandard-worker effects are unclear.	Examine distributional benefits across work types.
Siriopoulos & Kassapi, 2023	Daycare participation and reconciliation	Voucher participation varies regionally before and after COVID-19.	Long-term employment effects are less developed.	Link vouchers to job retention, income, and job quality.
Coda Moscarola et al., 2016	Absenteeism and sick leave	Low-income grandmothers in weak childcare regions increased sick leave after reform.	Findings focus on older women, not young mothers.	Study absenteeism among low-wage mothers and shift workers.
Hwang et al., 2025	Parenting stress and career stability	Work–childcare conflict and job demands contribute to parenting stress.	Cross-sectional design limits causal inference.	Use longitudinal designs for childcare compatibility and retention.
Mat Pozian et al., 2024	Wellbeing, anxiety, and depression	Family-friendly conditions are associated with women's wellbeing.	Daycare-specific effects are not isolated.	Study childcare-specific workplace support among low-wage workers.
Da Roit et al., 2019	ECEC development and daycare take-up	Public/subsidized daycare development varies across Italian regions.	Employment outcomes are not directly estimated.	Study local institutional factors and childcare demand together.
Bordone et al., 2017	Grandparental childcare patterns	Grandparental care varies with policy context and working mothers' needs.	Formal daycare effects are not isolated.	Compare formal, informal, and mixed childcare arrangements.
Zhong & Peng, 2020	Childbirth, childcare, and employment decisions	Limited public care and expensive private care constrain family and work choices.	Focuses on middle-class families.	Examine similar barriers among lower-income urban mothers.
Recchi et al., 2025	Remote work and care-model	Remote work can substitute for	Less relevant for work that	Avoid using flexibility as a

Reference	Outcome	Main finding	Limitation	Future research implication
	inequality	insufficient care in familialistic regimes.	cannot be done from home.	substitute for childcare infrastructure.
Garcia et al., 2025	SDG 5 support and social performance	Organizational SDG 5 support is linked to HR practices and work-life balance.	Childcare is not the specific focus.	Measure childcare as a concrete SDG 5 workplace practice.
Nakray, 2024	Gender-sensitive fiscal and social policy	Middle-income welfare analysis must address unpaid family work.	Broad scope limits daycare-specific evidence.	Map daycare policy in middle-income urban contexts.

Figure 6 shows the evidence landscape identified in the scoping review by organizing the literature into commonly reported outcomes, methodological approaches, major evidence gaps, and future research readiness. The first layer summarizes outcomes frequently reported in the literature, including women's labor-force participation, working hours, job retention, absenteeism, income security, work–family balance, wellbeing, and childcare attendance or service use. The second layer shows methodological diversity, including quantitative policy evaluation, qualitative studies, cross-sectional surveys, comparative welfare analysis, macroeconomic modeling, historical analysis, and policy advocacy research. The third layer identifies persistent evidence gaps: limited attention to low-wage women, informal workers, blue-collar workers, migrant women, shift workers, low- and middle-income countries, city-level governance, implementation costs, service quality, and long-term employment outcomes. This mapping is consistent with the scoping-review purpose of charting evidence characteristics, heterogeneity, and gaps rather than estimating universal causal effects (Munn et al., 2018; Tricco et al., 2018). Figure 6 therefore provides a transition from findings to discussion by showing that the field is sufficiently developed for evidence mapping, but not yet mature enough to support definitive claims about one universally effective childcare model.

5. Discussion

This scoping review shows that childcare should be understood as a gender-responsive component of labor infrastructure. The central contribution of the evidence is not a single estimate of childcare effectiveness, but a conceptual and policy map showing how care arrangements shape employment possibilities. Labor reforms, fertility policies, and welfare arrangements can produce unequal outcomes when they assume that families will absorb care needs privately. Italian pension-reform evidence and Chinese fertility-policy evidence both show that women often carry the adjustment costs when care infrastructure is inadequate (Coda Moscarola et al., 2016; Dong & Li, 2025).

The findings also demonstrate that childcare access is multidimensional. Access is not simply the existence of a daycare center. It includes cost, distance, safety, trust, service quality, age eligibility, operating hours, and compatibility with real work schedules. This is especially important for low-wage

women, whose jobs may be shift-based, informal, physically demanding, geographically distant, or poorly protected. Nurses' parenting stress illustrates the importance of schedule compatibility, while Greek voucher evidence highlights affordability and regional variation (Hwang et al., 2025; Siriopoulos & Kassapi, 2023).

A key implication is that childcare policy should be integrated with the broader care economy. Studies of social reproduction, familialism, and care markets show that weak public provision shifts responsibility to households, grandmothers, migrants, and low-paid care workers (Farris, 2020; Žalimienė et al., 2020). This means that expanding childcare is not automatically gender-just unless the rights, pay, training, and dignity of childcare workers are also protected. Care justice must include both women who need childcare and women who provide it.

The evidence also challenges the assumption that flexible work can substitute for childcare. Remote work may hide care deficits in familialistic regimes, but it cannot help women whose jobs require physical presence in factories, service sites, transport, domestic work, or informal markets (Recchi et al., 2025). Commute-related evidence further suggests that spatial barriers shape women's employment access (Kaaua & Virudachalam, 2025). Childcare policy for low-wage women therefore requires spatial planning, transport awareness, and proximity to homes, workplaces, or commuting routes.

Public, workplace, and community models each have advantages and limits. Public or subsidized childcare can reduce the cost burden and support broader access, but it requires adequate local supply and quality assurance. Employer-supported childcare can help formal employees, but it risks excluding informal workers and women in small or fragmented workplaces. Community-based childcare may respond to local needs, but it requires stable financing, regulation, and training. The evidence from informal workers in Africa and family-friendly work conditions in Malaysia shows why policy cannot rely on a single institutional actor (Moussié & Alfers, 2018; Mat Pozian et al., 2024).

Another important finding concerns policy sequencing. Paid leave, childcare eligibility, early childhood education, and return-to-work transitions must be coordinated. A care gap between leave and early childhood education may interrupt women's employment, especially where households cannot purchase private care (Simčić, 2025). In-kind childcare benefits may address time constraints more directly than cash transfers, but their value depends on whether services are available, trusted, and compatible with work (Hagiwara, 2025).

The review also reveals social and geographic gaps in the evidence. High-income welfare states and professional groups are more visible than low-wage women, migrant workers, informal workers, blue-collar workers, and women in low- and middle-income urban contexts. Middle-income welfare analysis suggests that unpaid family care is often assumed rather than funded (Nakray, 2024). Studies of women's health-service access in Indonesia, India, Ethiopia, and Nigeria show that service use is shaped by resources, autonomy, location, and system capacity, but these insights have not been sufficiently integrated into childcare and employment research (Kurniati et al., 2018; Agho et al., 2018).

Methodologically, the field is not ready for a definitive universal claim about the best childcare model. The evidence includes quasi-experimental studies, cross-sectional surveys, qualitative studies, historical analysis, comparative welfare work, policy analysis, and macroeconomic modeling. This heterogeneity justifies a scoping review rather than a meta-analysis. It also highlights the need for future research to measure childcare access consistently and to distinguish availability, affordability, usability, quality, and compatibility. Studies of public childcare take-up and grandparental care show that outcomes depend heavily on local context and family arrangements (Da Roit et al., 2019; Bordone et al., 2017).

For policy and practice, the findings point toward gender-responsive childcare systems. Such systems should prioritize affordability, flexible and extended operating hours, physical proximity, safety, quality assurance, caregiver training, age-appropriate services, and trust. They should also coordinate local government, employers, unions, communities, and care providers. Corporate SDG 5 commitments can support work-life balance practices, but they require concrete mechanisms and should not replace public responsibility (Garcia et al., 2025). The goal is not only to increase female labor-force participation but to make work decent, sustainable, and compatible with family wellbeing.

The review has limitations. It relies primarily on Scopus and English-language articles, and therefore may underrepresent local policy documents, non-English studies, grey literature, and community-based evidence. The included studies also vary in design and outcome measurement, making comparison difficult. Nevertheless, the mapped evidence provides a coherent argument: childcare is not peripheral to gender equality or decent work. It is a public, social, and labor-market infrastructure that conditions women's capacity to participate in paid work with dignity and security.

6. Conclusion

This scoping review mapped evidence linking childcare access with women's employment, work–family reconciliation, gender equality, and decent work. The findings show that childcare is best understood not only as child welfare provision or family assistance, but as gender-responsive labor infrastructure. Across the literature, childcare shapes women's labor-force participation, working hours, employment continuity, wellbeing, and capacity to reconcile paid and unpaid work.

The review identified four main evidence domains: conceptual framings of childcare as labor infrastructure; access barriers related to affordability, geography, quality, safety, trust, and operating hours; policy, workplace, and community models of support; and reported outcomes and gaps. Public childcare, subsidies, in-kind benefits, employer support, and community-based arrangements each contribute differently, but their usefulness depends on local labor conditions and service compatibility.

The evidence also shows persistent gaps. Low-wage, blue-collar, informal, migrant, shift-working, and urban working-class women remain underrepresented. Future research should examine childcare models that are affordable, locally accessible, work-compatible, and grounded in the everyday realities of low-wage women. The review contributes theoretically by linking care economy, gendered labor markets, work–family reconciliation, and decent work. It contributes practically by supporting childcare policy as

an inclusive labor-market strategy that can strengthen gender equality, family wellbeing, and social justice.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Ahmad Nizar Hilmi conceived the review, led the literature search and data charting, synthesized the evidence, and drafted the manuscript. Adam Jamal, Lili Nur Indah Sari, and Revienda Anita Fitrie contributed to manuscript development, literature discussion, critical revision, and final approval. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures

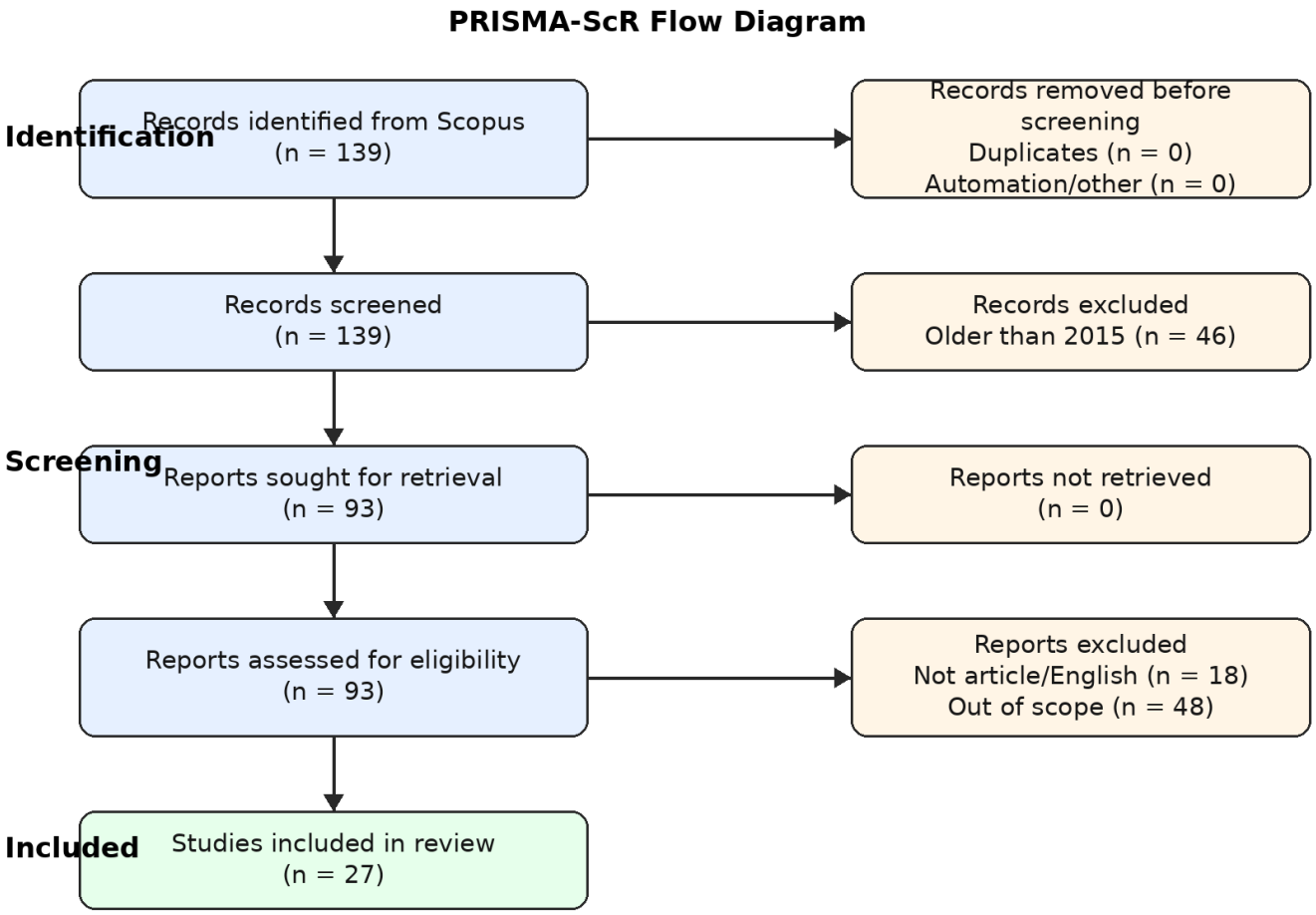


Figure 1

PRISMA-ScR flow diagram detailing the search, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion process.

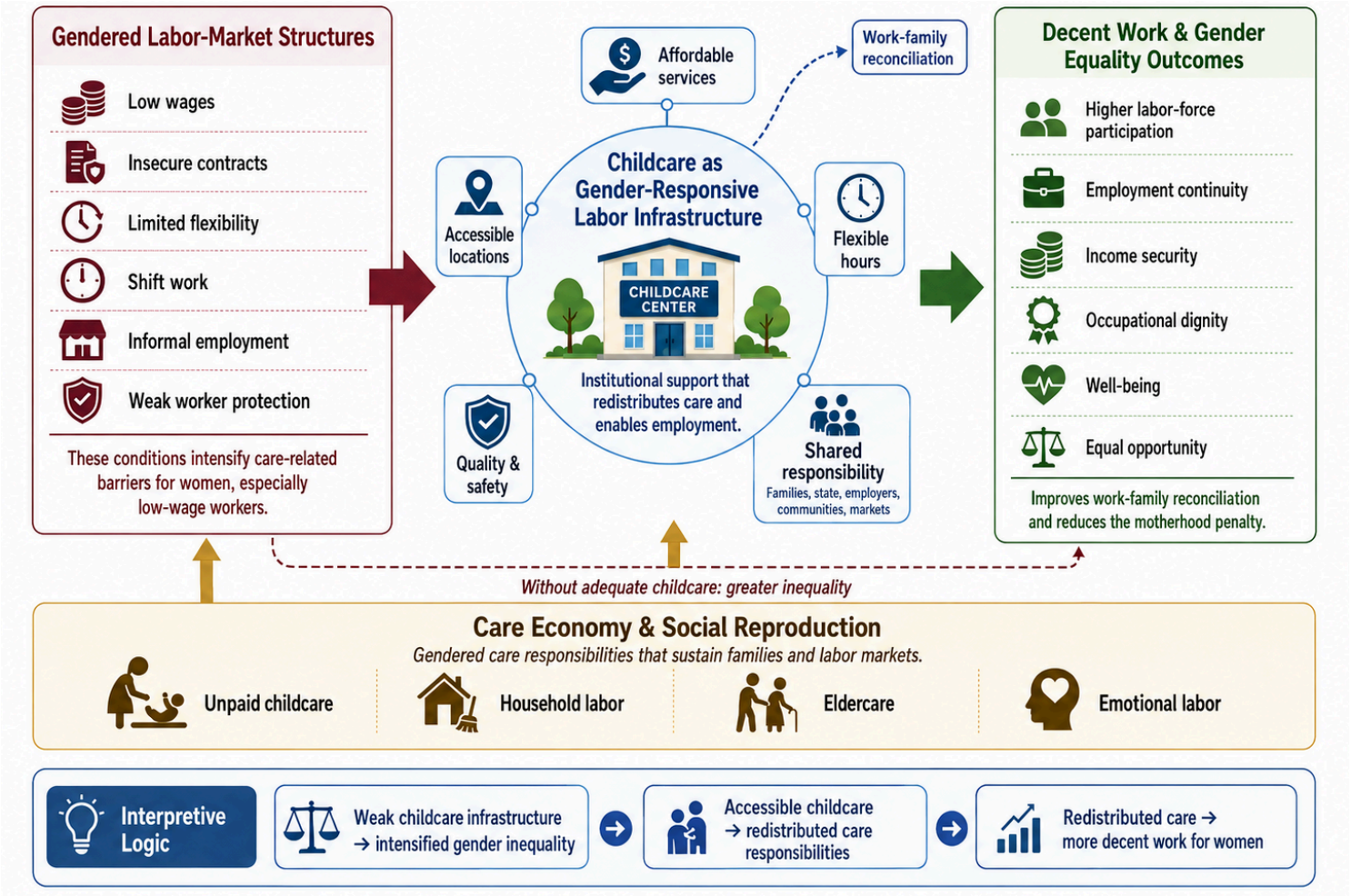


Figure 2

Theoretical Framework Linking Childcare, Social Reproduction, Gendered Labor Markets, and Decent Work.

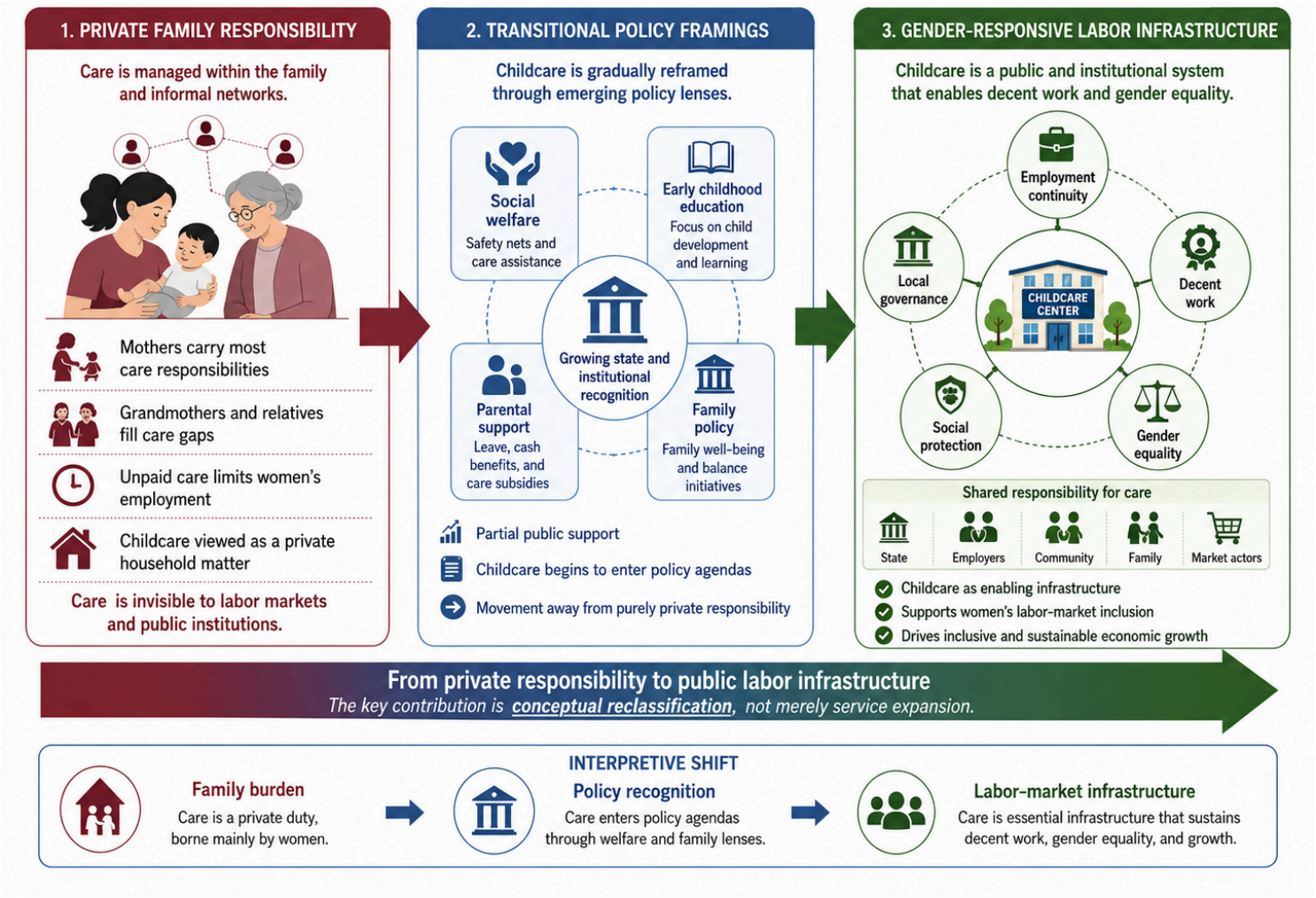


Figure 3

Conceptual Shift from Childcare as Private Family Support to Childcare as Gender-Responsive Labor Infrastructure.

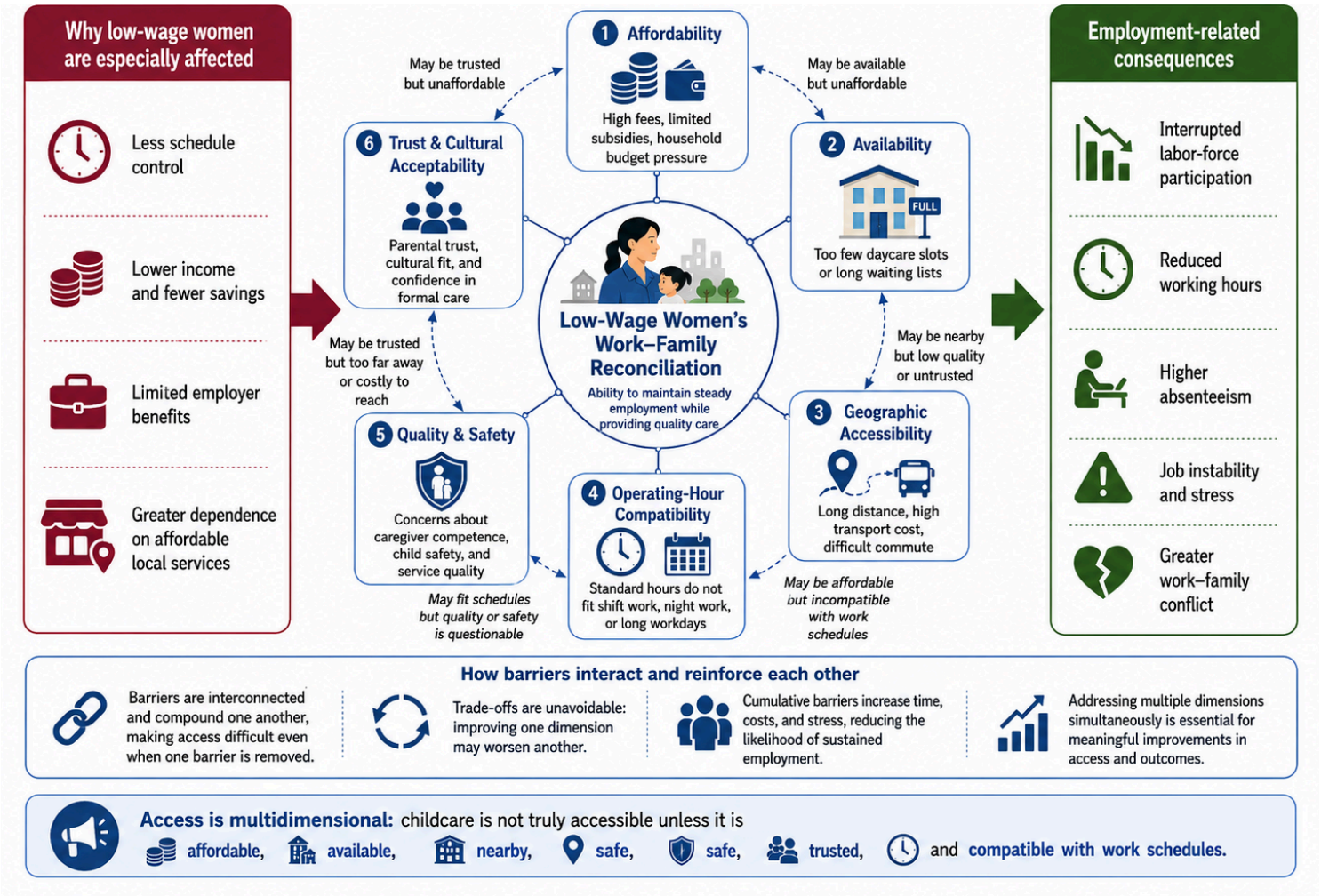


Figure 4

Multidimensional Childcare-Access Barriers Affecting Low-Wage Women's Work–Family Reconciliation.

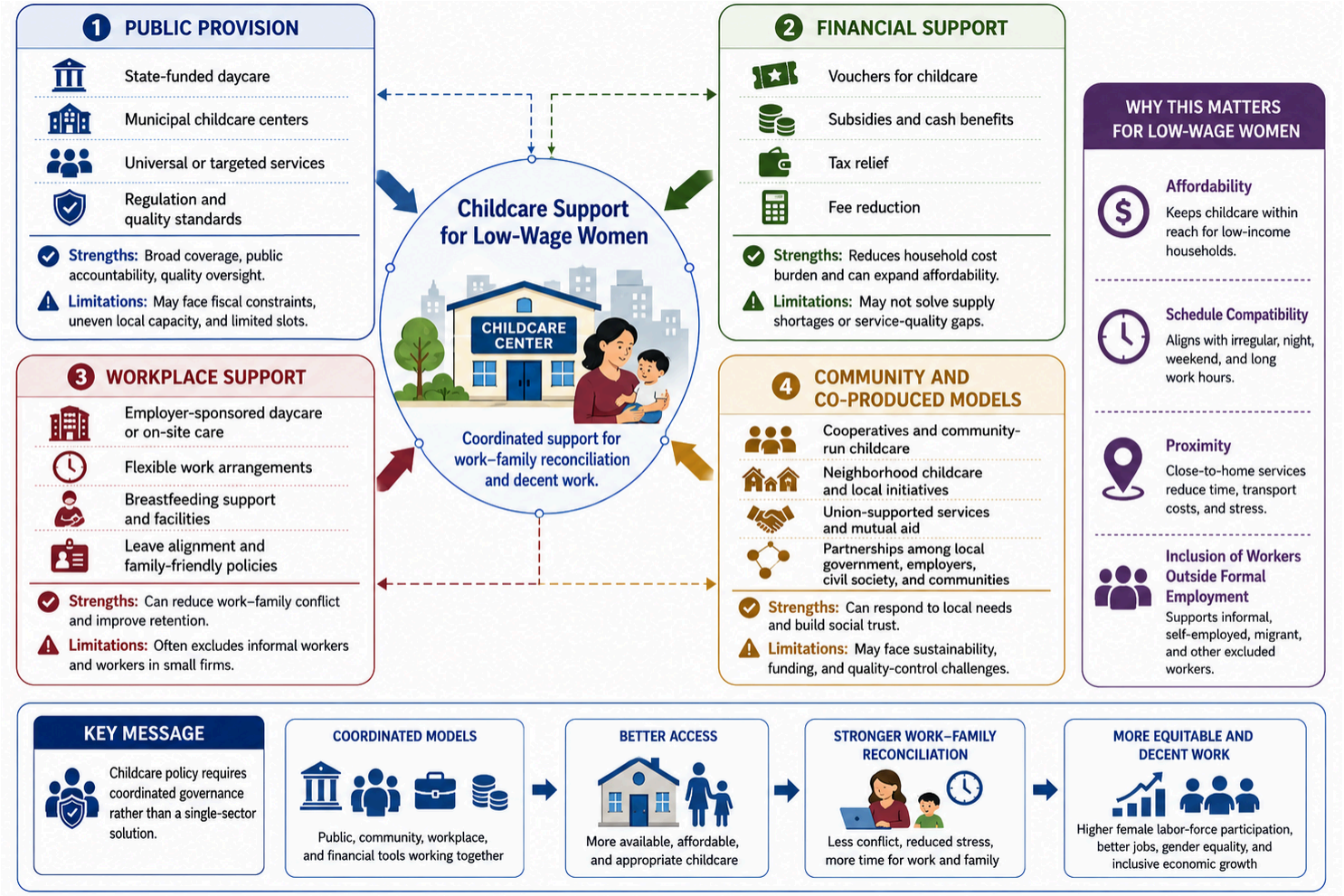


Figure 5

Policy, Workplace, and Community Models for Childcare Support.

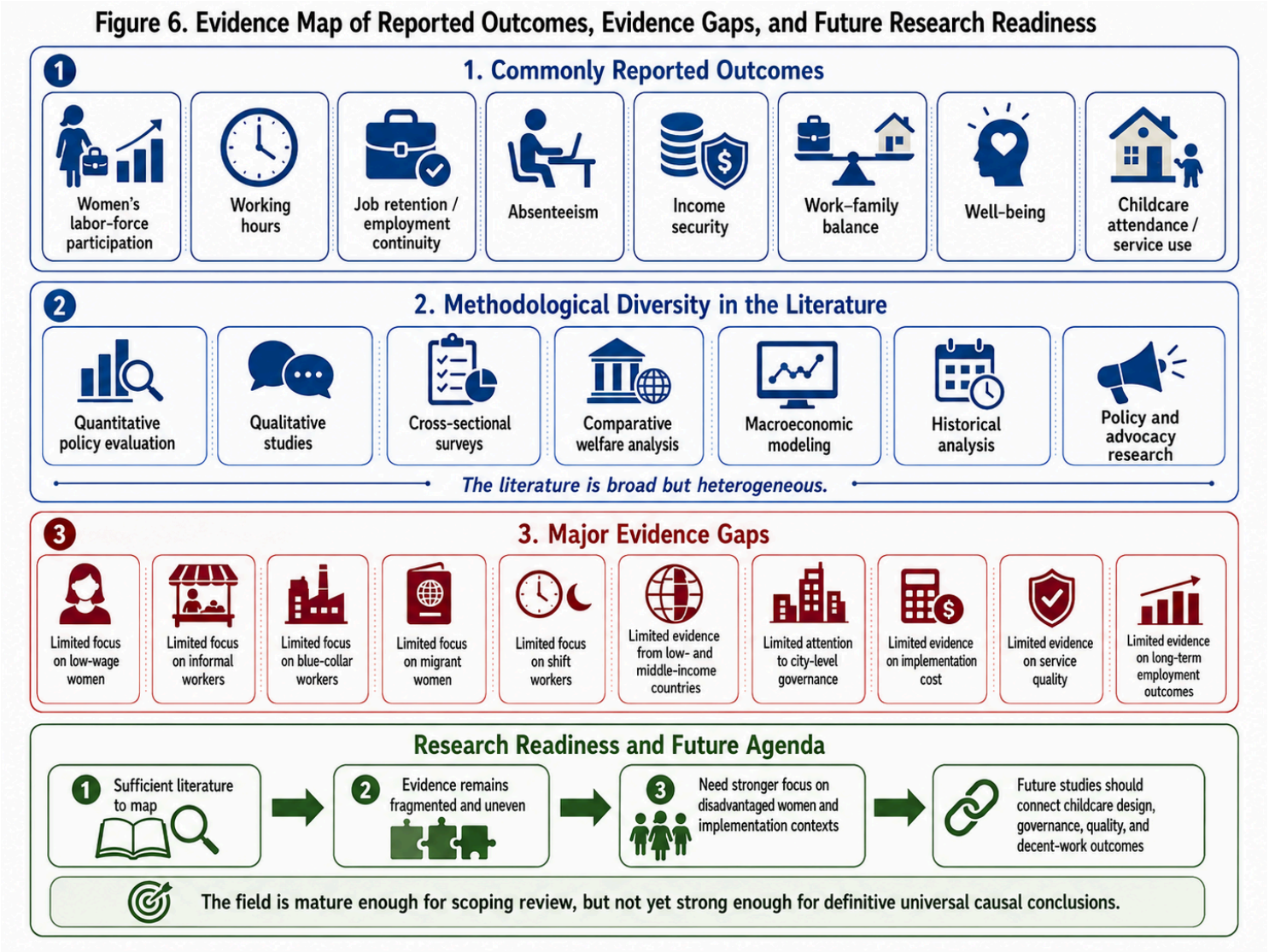


Figure 6

Evidence Map of Reported Outcomes, Evidence Gaps, and Future Research Readiness.

Supplementary Files

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- SupplementaryTableS1StudyCharting.docx