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Quarterly Bulletin of the Vienna NGO Committee on the Family

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Dear Readers of 'Families International',

We open this 137th issue of our Quarterly Bulletin of the Vienna NGO Committee on the Family with two substantial contributions from UNICEF Innocenti. The first presents the outcomes of the Leading Minds Conference 2025 on The Future of Education in Africa. This youth-led and forward-looking dialogue explores how education systems across the continent can strengthen foundational learning, promote inclusion and resilience, and thoughtfully integrate AI and digital technologies to prepare children and young people for the decades ahead. The second article, Testing Digital Accessibility in Education: The Case of the Dominican Republic, shares findings from a pilot initiative on accessible digital textbooks. It highlights both the potential of inclusive digital tools for children with and without disabilities and the practical challenges related to infrastructure, teacher training and implementation.

From our member organisation Make Mothers Matter (MMM), we feature the article "Climate Change: A Maternal Physical and Mental Health Emergency". Developed ahead of COP30 in Belém, the Policy Brief calls for maternal and newborn health – including maternal mental health – to be fully integrated into climate policy and finance.

As always, you will find at the end of this issue a selection of current and upcoming events relevant to families and family policy.

Sincerely,

Christin Kohler, MA

Executive Editor

<i>Table of Contents</i>

From UNICEF Innocenti

The Future of Education in Africa	3
Testing Digital Accessibility in Education	18

From Member Organisations of the Vienna NGO Committee on the Family

<u>Make Mothers Matter</u>	
Climate Change: A Maternal Physical and Mental Health Emergency	29

Upcoming Events	36
------------------------	----

Impressum	37
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From UNICEF Innocenti

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LEADING MINDS CONFERENCE 2025

The Future of Education in Africa

Outcomes report



Summary

Led by youth, with inputs from a range of experts, the UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti Leading Minds Conference held in Nairobi in November 2025 explored the many possible ways that education in Africa could evolve in coming decades. The conference built on the momentum of the [Decade of Education](#) declared by the African Union and [A Strategy for UNICEF's Contribution to Africa's Development Agendas](#). Participants included teachers, policymakers, the private sector, youth and civil society.

At the heart of the conversations were some important truths:

- [By 2050, about two out of every five children will live in Africa](#): their education will shape not just their lives and their continent, but the whole world.
- Children are not just recipients of education – they create it, they are its best critics, and they are ideally placed to make it fit for the future.
- Our current system is failing children. [Nine out of 10 learners in sub-Saharan Africa are unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10](#).
- Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technology are here to stay. They bring risks and opportunities, and it is up to us to manage these.

The conversations were forward-looking. They used proven foresight methodologies to envisage different versions of education in Africa and drew on work done in the lead-up to the conference. Informed by data, research, evidence, experience and their own capacity to dream, participants imagined worlds where foundational learning was central, inclusion was a given, and AI and digital technologies supported teachers and learners in a context where risks were carefully managed.

Not all the futures imagined were positive. If business as usual continues, if systems do not equip learners with core competencies, if the harms to children online are not managed and insufficient numbers of teachers are left unsupported, then Africa will not reap the benefits of a demographic dividend.

Yet, overall, participants were techno-optimists and believed that every child in Africa in 2050 can benefit from an education system that equips them for twenty-first-century life. The conference led to concrete and bold calls to action aimed at transforming the future of education in Africa.

PART I #

The challenge

Participants focused on four questions:

- What will it take to enhance human capital and capabilities in Africa?
- How can we strengthen the role of teachers in education?
- What will it take to ensure that education systems in Africa are equipping children with relevant skills for the future?
- What roles can AI and digital intelligence play in strengthening systems and in rolling out education in Africa?

Some opening provocations laid the groundwork for discussion.

Etleva Kadilli, Regional Director, Eastern and Southern Africa, UNICEF, reminded us why it was so important that this meeting took place in Nairobi. The demographic trend towards younger populations in Africa underlines the importance of reforming current systems and the huge opportunities that exist on the continent.

“Education systems should move from being a measure of performance to an indicator of strength – teaching kids not to go to AI but to work alongside it – shifting from teaching students to remember things, to training them to be critical thinkers.”

– **CRYSTAL**, Youth Foresight Fellow

Dr. Robert Gichuhi Ndegwa, Director of Policy, Partnership and East Africa Community Affairs at the Ministry of Education, spoke about the Government of Kenya’s investments in children. It’s not about bricks and mortar but rather about equipping young people with twenty-first-century skills.

Investing in young people involves:

- believing in their potential.
- equipping them.
- listening to them.
- giving them the tools they need.

Young people must be included in decisions and processes that affect them.

Foundational learning

Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, Chairperson, School of Politics, Policy and Governance and President, Human Capital Africa, provoked us to share in her horror at the data. When children throughout Africa are spending years of their lives sitting in classrooms but not learning basic literacy and numeracy, then we are failing them. Just as we are failing all those who are out of school because the system does not address their disabilities, because the schools are too far from their homes, or we have not convinced their parents and communities that education matters.

“Our school systems mainly focus on academic intelligence; and it’s time for us to think of incorporating mental intelligence and creative intelligence – we must listen to children and youth in order to co-create an integrated system.”

– **SOPIA**, Youth Foresight Fellow

She spoke from personal experience, noting that in every school she sees enthusiastic children, but they are not learning. For her, the failure is at the political as well as technical level. We talk about allocating a certain percentage of budget to education, but budgeting for education doesn’t always equal investment in learning. Dr. Ezekwesili saw no tension between a focus on foundational learning and the need to spend money on training young people for jobs. We talk about training young people in higher-level skills for jobs, but how can that work if their foundational skills are weak? A plumber needs to use numbers to run a business. An electrician needs to be able to read the instructions to be able to install a socket. In her analysis, we are producing people that the labour market is rejecting.

Yet Dr. Ezekwesili also offered a path out of this situation. Drawing on models that she had seen working in other countries, she cited the need to make learning a political mission. When she meets heads of state in Africa, she greets them in their capacity as ‘Chief Learning Officers’ and asks each of them, “What did our children learn in school today?”

“Everyone needs to feel safe at school ... In Senegalese society a badjène gokh is a woman whose role is to advise young people, especially girls. A badjène gokh should be part of the team in schools taking care of the needs of the students.”

– **MOUSTAPHA**, Youth Foresight Fellow

In light of these presentations, and subsequent discussions, participants agreed on the importance of foundational learning. Beyond basic literacy and numeracy, they insisted that our education system needs to equip young people with social-behavioural skills and digital literacy. Critical thinking, contextualization of learning and capacity-building for teachers were concepts

that came up in discussion repeatedly, as did a recognition of structural barriers and cultural norms that hinder access, especially for girls.

It was agreed that education cannot be reduced to schooling. Foundational learning requires investment in the capacity to learn, not just physical infrastructure. There was consensus on the need to reimagine learning as a social process that builds curiosity, empathy and creativity from early childhood.

Digital education and AI

We are already living in the age of AI and digital technology.

Research shows that being online can be a risky business, especially for children and young people: as internet use in the population increases, so does exposure to harm. The pivotal point at which exposure accelerates is when approximately 50 per cent of a country's population have access to the internet. Many African countries find themselves at, or close to, that point and can learn from the failures of high-income countries that reached it earlier.

Not all online risks lead to harm. Taking risks is an important part of learning. What an adult sees as a threat, children might see as an opportunity. What adults see as safe, young people might think of as restrictive.

Daniel Kardefelt Winther, Research Manager, Digital Engagement and Protection, UNICEF Innocenti, presented findings from extensive research conducted by UNICEF Innocenti and partners over recent years. A helpful framework outlined four aspects to consider:

- Content – what children see. This might include exposure to violent, sexual or misleading content.
- Contact – who children interact with. Peers, family members and strangers can harm children online and in person.
- Conduct – what children do themselves. This might include sharing harmful content or bullying.
- Contract – how data is used. Commercial systems might use children's data, often without their knowledge and consent, in ways that undermine their privacy.

Many of the issues we see online are not new problems: violence, discrimination and inequalities manifest and are amplified in digital spaces. We can't address digital safety as simply a problem of technology, nor can we ignore the fact that while technology companies may not cause harm

themselves, they sometimes enable it. For example, most cases of online sexual abuse are linked to social media platforms. This raises questions about the way we hold companies accountable.

Research shows the myriad benefits that come with advances in digital technology. Teaching can be tailored to each learner's abilities, learning materials can be quickly and affordably adapted to local contexts, teachers can be supported on routine tasks, and AI can make learning fun. We should also explore the ways that AI can overcome some of the drawbacks of existing education systems: in research undertaken by the UNICEF Innocenti Youth Foresight Fellows in the lead-up to the conference, it was noted that AI agents can be easier to approach and communicate with than teachers. Some learners said that they would rather not risk a teacher reproaching them for asking a 'silly' or 'unnecessary' question. Examples from Sudan showed how digital tools can help in humanitarian settings, including when schools are shut down.

It was agreed that teachers need training on how to integrate AI into the learning experience, and that they should see it as an aid, not as competition. Young people want to see AI embedded in the curriculum, while acknowledging the importance of avoiding a culture of overreliance on technology. Learners must build skills in critical thinking, learn to identify misinformation and be supported to stay safe online.

"I envision a future where children can have solar panel-equipped iPads in their backpacks – so electricity and network don't become an issue."

– **NATALIO**, Youth Foresight Fellow

The role of the private sector was extensively discussed. AI is not just a technology – it is a business model. Participants noted that big tech companies are harnessing the best skills on the continent; they should be held accountable for the safety of their tools and platforms, while contributing to educating the public on how to use AI optimally. Companies are under pressure to move fast and feel that developing products safely might slow them down: they need to be rewarded, not penalized, for making safe products. Data was considered crucial. It's important to know more about how data is being used and how government is making businesses comply with data privacy and protection regulations. Examples were given of instances where partnerships with the private sector can make internet access free for learners so that there is no economic burden for parents.

Consideration was also given to the fact that AI wasn't built with Africa as the focus. There is a need to build AI that is suited to agricultural economies, for example, or to those that are still struggling to provide their citizens with basic amenities such as schools and hospitals. The need for a stable electricity supply was also acknowledged. AI and digital education can, and must,

meet the needs of those with disabilities such as vision and hearing impairments. It can also respond to the fact that everyone learns differently: some people are visual learners, others need hands-on experience.

Inclusion and resilience

From the Sustainable Development Goals to the [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child](#), the need for education to be inclusive and equitable has been recognized as a priority.

"[The] digital divide and inequality gap ... came up from my research workshops. Students from rural areas and underrepresented communities might lag behind when it comes to building skills related to AI for the future of work. I urge educators, policymakers and industry leaders to invest in equitable and safe AI education for every learner."

– **Beatrice**, Youth Foresight Fellow

Throughout the Leading Minds conference, sessions emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence, solidarity and equality of access. Participants highlighted the role of indigenous wisdom and competency-based curricula in fostering resilience. Discussions underscored the need for practice-based learning and parental support, and the youth fellows advocated for inclusive spaces that prevent bullying and promote empathy.

Participants shared their experiences and acknowledged the need to think broadly, taking into account the needs of children with disabilities, girls, the poor and refugees. Thinking about how to make education systems meet the requirements of all children also necessitates consideration of children's need to learn in their own languages and how to reach those who currently have low learning outcomes or are out of school.

Teachers told of their own experience and the way they had learned on the job, developed creative solutions, benefited from training and taken the initiative to train other teachers, parents and community members. The need for all learners to feel safe was emphasized, and this encompassed policies for safeguarding as well as practical considerations such as the importance of adequate sanitation in schools, including facilities for girls to manage their menstrual hygiene needs and wheelchair-accessible toilets.

"Curriculums and educational policies often lack representations of the needs, realities and aspirations of students, teachers and facilitators coming from marginalized communities."

– **SAMPADA**, Youth Foresight Fellow

Many countries in Africa now have good policies as regards the inclusion of children with disabilities into education systems, including in mainstream schools, however there is often a gap between policy and practice. Nonetheless, trainings do happen and efforts are being made by governments to address challenges and provide tools, such as digital devices, adapted devices, guidance for teachers and information on basic infrastructure adaptations.

Many of the education systems are based on a Western construct, and localization was highlighted as a key element for success. Advocacy with community and school leaders was also seen as an important element of social behaviour change. In addition, there is still much to be done in order to tackle inclusion issues across the board.

PART II #

The futures we create

During the Leading Minds conference, the youth fellows guided participants through a range of activities based on well-established foresight methodologies. Imagining different types of futures – possible, probable and preferred – is a powerful way of identifying what we do, and don't, want to see happen. Once we know where we want to head, we can plan our pathway and the actions we need to take to get there. Equally, visions of just how badly things could turn out give a compelling and urgent indication of the risks we need to guard against.

Two methodologies were used in the lead-up to, and during, the 2025 Leading Minds conference. The results of this work are the subject of more detailed reports.

Young Visionaries: Child Rights Youth Foresight Report on Education 2025

The Young Visionaries: Child Rights Youth Foresight Report on Education 2025

is a youth-led exploration of how education could and should evolve to meet the opportunities and

risks of tomorrow. Fifteen Youth Foresight Fellows designed and led national research projects, organizing over 40 workshops and engaging more than 800 children and young people across

15 countries. Using foresight tools, they identified signals of change, imagined preferred futures, and created space for honest conversations about hopes, fears and possibilities.

A recurring message was that children and young people are yearning for more opportunities and agency to shape their learning journeys. They highlighted some of the changes they would like to see, including taking charge of the narrative.

Taking charge of the narrative

Working in small groups during the conference, participants developed metaphors to describe the worst aspects of the current education system and the classroom experience. They came back to this exercise a few days later to rewrite the script and define more hopeful futures.

The narratives changed from these

School is like a prison ...
Schools are a waste of time ...
Digital connection is bad for youth ...
Education is a Western thing ...
Schools are not safe ...
Teaching is undervalued ...
Someday someone will fix it ...
A child is an envelope to be filled with knowledge ...

to these

... Schools are like gardens.
... Schools are peace labs.
... Schools are nests where children grow.
... Education doesn't need a passport in a borderless world.
... Education is the light and hope for the future.
... A child is an envelope full of creativity to be explored.
... Education is learning and learning is education.

Headlines of the future

Groups were assigned the task of imagining the news stories of the future under a range of situations. They came up with witty and thought-provoking 'front-page headlines', following in the footsteps of virtual networks of youth foresight practitioners who had undertaken a similar exercise in previous weeks. Participants voted on which of the scenarios they found most probable, which were the most worrying and which gave them the most hope.

The scariest prospect for most people was one in which communication was impossible, teachers scarce and jobs unavailable. But many scenarios gave participants hope, among them a vision of an inclusive future where AI supported human goodwill to create a world where language was no longer a barrier.

“The kids’ ideas were inspired by their imagination of the future. They envisioned classrooms that could dynamically adapt to different subjects and activities – almost like changing weather patterns – by adjusting lighting, greenery and other environmental elements. For instance, when studying history, the classroom might incorporate sounds and sensory details to bring the past to life. I find this concept both innovative and inspiring.”

– Ayoub, Youth Foresight Fellow

Interactive radar

The interactive radar shows signals of change identified by young people that could greatly impact the future of education in Africa.

In 2025, 15 UNICEF Innocenti Youth Foresight Fellows from around the world identified emerging issues they believe could transform how we learn, teach and grow. Their collective

insights reveal signals of change across seven vital education domains, explored through Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, and Political and Legal (STEEP) perspectives.

PART III #

Calls to action

The future is not predestined. Our actions will determine how education in Africa can change to meet the needs of learners, and of the continent as a whole. Participants at Leading Minds identified actions that each of us can take now to make sure those futures are optimal.

Policymakers

- Become a champion for basic literacy and numeracy for every learner.
- Ensure good governance and data privacy keep children safe online.
- Support capacity-building for teachers.
- Embed implementation research into large-scale education programmes and teacher training, and adjust programmes in real time in light of what is learned.

Teachers

- Share your wealth of experience in successfully teaching children to reach expected foundational learning levels.
- Exchange ideas about proven ways to support children with disabilities learn in mainstream education.
- Learn from students about the ways they are already using AI and digital technology.
- Consider digital technologies as ways to contextualize materials and address workload.

Business leaders

- Build and scale up safe digital and AI tools that make learning fun.
- Put protection and equity at the heart of development – don't create tools then look for ways to make them safe.
- Identify the skills needed for your twenty-first-century workforce and support systems that help learners gain these skills.

Parents and communities

- Insist on basic literacy and numeracy for all.
- Embrace digital technologies and AI, rather than fearing them, and learn with children about the possibilities they offer.
- Stay vigilant and take seriously the risks to children online. Hold policymakers and developers accountable for addressing them.

Learners

- Continue to use AI and digital tools to build foundational and higher-level skills, inside and outside the classroom.
- Imagine, and demand, education systems for the twenty-first century and beyond.

Concluding thoughts and next steps

The work of Leading Minds does not stop here. These discussions have contributed to a vision for Africa that strengthens and builds on the existing education system. It draws on the experience of what is already working, using solid data to drive considered changes. What is clear is that we don't have enough schools and enough teachers to meet the needs of the growing and diverse cohort of African children and young people, so we need to use technology thoughtfully to fill these gaps.

"We need education systems that start career exploration theory in middle school, help students discover their passions, and choose paths that align with their dreams and passions. Because I guess success is all about loving what you do and doing what you love."

- Ifaliana, Youth Foresight Fellow

We also need to look beyond the school setting, taking into account the roles of parents, communities and politicians, and exploring the potential of informal settings where children can learn through technologies such as video games.

In the hands of young leaders, the education systems of the future will see literacy and numeracy firmly established and complemented by social-behavioural skills and digital literacy. Twenty-first-century competencies will equip young people to enter the workforce, driving their own fulfilment and the economic success of the continent. Digital technologies and AI will support the work of teachers and parents in an environment where risks are managed and learning is fun.

The findings reported here will inform the implementation of the [Strategy for UNICEF's Contribution to Africa's Development](#). UNICEF Innocenti Youth Foresight Fellows will leverage their networks to discuss and take forward the recommendations.

This is a conversation that will not stop. We will continue to actively shape the futures of education in Africa, using evidence and foresight, in a spirit of optimism and confidence.

Acknowledgements

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About us

UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential.

UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti accelerates progress for children by working to ensure that policies and programming are informed by high-quality evidence. As the global custodian of child-related official statistics, it works closely with governments and partners to strengthen national statistical systems. Through world-leading data, research and foresight, it underpins UNICEF's global leadership on children's rights and serves as the organization's hub for setting strategy and monitoring programmes. With the active engagement of young people and other partners, it supports advocacy and dialogue aimed at improving the lives of children everywhere.

UNICEF Innocenti provides, for every child, answers to their most pressing concerns.

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WORKING PAPER

Testing Digital Accessibility in Education

The Case of the Dominican Republic

Contents

I. Introduction	3
II. Methodology	3
III. Key findings	4
RQ.1 To what extent are the participating teachers and students prepared to use technology in the classroom?	4
RQ.2 To what extent does the ICT infrastructure in the schools allow the use of technology in the classroom?	5
RQ.3 To what extent do children with and without disabilities interact with the ADTs?	5
RQ.4 To what extent do teachers use ADTs to foster inclusion in the classroom?	6
IV. Conclusion	7
Annex	9

I. Introduction

In the Dominican Republic, children with disabilities have limited opportunities to access education. However, in recent years, several efforts have promoted a transition towards an inclusive education model to benefit all children. In this context, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education of the Dominican Republic (MINERD) tested the usability and suitability of accessible digital storybooks (ADTs, for the purposes of this document) with the aim of providing accessible digital learning materials to children with and without disabilities.

In the Dominican Republic, the Accessible Digital Textbooks initiative (ADT initiative) is anchored in two key education policies. The first, the Initial Literacy Programme to Build the Foundation for Learning (Con Base), is a nationwide programme that includes didactical guides and student booklets for learning. The second, the Inclusive Education Model, was legally established through a regulation approved by the National Education Council in July 2024.

In 2023/24, as part of the ADT initiative, the Dominican Republic developed two ADTs for first- and third-graders. These materials provide access to educational content in various formats such as audio narration, sign language videos and image description. Through these formats, printed books are made accessible, allowing children with disabilities to access the same content, participate in the same activities and learn in the same classroom as their peers.

To prepare for the implementation, a pilot was conducted in six schools in Santo Domingo and Santiago de los Caballeros, the country's two largest cities, in May 2024. Guided by UNICEF and supported by the MINERD, it aimed to test the introduction of ADTs in classrooms. Teachers identified the most suitable accessibility features to integrate into their teaching practices and lesson activities, considering available information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure as well as children's access needs and learning preferences.

II. Methodology

Research was embedded as part of the pilot to understand its implementation, including best practices, emerging challenges and additional support needs. Evidence from this research will provide valuable lessons learned to plan a phased expansion and scale-up of the ADT initiative throughout the country.

To do this, this research will address the following research questions:

- RQ.1 To what extent are the participating teachers and students prepared to use technology in the classroom?
- RQ.2 To what extent does the ICT infrastructure in the schools allow the use of technology in the classroom?
- RQ.3 To what extent do children with and without disabilities interact with the ADTs?
- RQ.4 To what extent do teachers use ADTs to foster inclusion in the classroom?

Through implementation research methods, quantitative and qualitative sources were triangulated to address the research questions. Sources included school assessment forms, pre- and post-implementation interviews with teachers, classroom observations and post-implementation focus group discussions with students (see Annex I). The data collection process involved UNICEF local consultants administering the instruments to 6 teachers, 4 children with visual and hearing disabilities, 14 children with intellectual disabilities, 17 children with autism and 63 children without disabilities. This was conducted across regular classrooms accommodating children with and without disabilities in regular schools, specific classrooms within regular schools that accommodate children with disabilities until they are ready to go into regular classrooms, and classrooms in special schools dedicated to children with disabilities. Each group of teachers and students had two sessions with the ADTs over a one-month period. All teachers had received formal training in inclusive education and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), supplemented by sessions to learn how to use the new technology in the classroom.

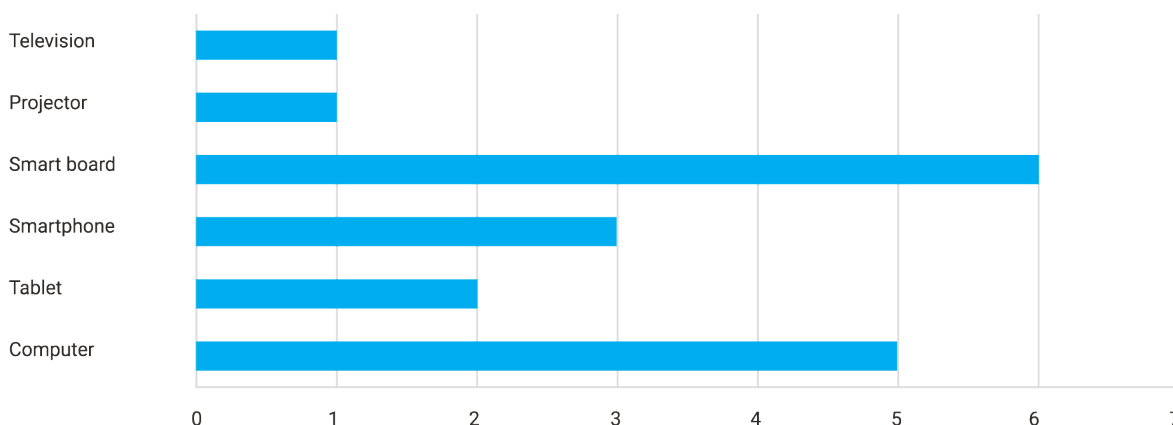
III. Key findings

The following section presents the pilot’s key findings, which are organized by each research question presented above:

RQ.1 To what extent are the participating teachers and students prepared to use technology in the classroom?

Teachers had received previous formal training on using technology for education, implemented through a blended approach in the classroom. Teachers indicated feeling comfortable with using smartphones, tablets and computers, as well as smart boards to display educational content and interactive educational games. Additionally, teachers use lesson-planning strategies that can ease the integration of technology, such as ADTs, into their teaching practices and classrooms.

Figure 1: Number of teachers that use digital devices during lessons



Number of teachers (n) = 6

Students indicated using digital devices such as smartphones, tablets and computers for entertainment and learning purposes. Entertainment activities include playing games, watching videos, and calling family and friends. For learning, students use devices for homework. They also mentioned using smart boards in the classroom for educational games in subjects like maths. Additionally, students use devices with minimal assistance, further contributing to developing an environment in which technology is used in classrooms.

RQ.2 To what extent does the ICT infrastructure in the schools allow the use of technology in the classroom?

Schools' data showed the availability of digital devices for teachers and students, but inadequate internet connectivity. Most schools have smart boards, and one has a television to project educational content. Tablets are provided for students but are not regularly used by those with disabilities due to concerns about their device-handling skills. Only one school has an ICT lab, and this school reported inoperative devices. Schools are on a good path towards supporting the use of technology in the classroom, but further improvements are needed.

Schools' data showed the availability of accessible educational materials for students with disabilities, including kits for autism and multiple disabilities; however, these are not regularly used. Teachers did not elaborate on the reasons for their limited use of these kits, despite having received training to support children with disabilities.

Schools also have procedures for identifying and assessing different disabilities. This information enhances understanding of schools' readiness, beyond ICT infrastructure, to support the use of technology such as ADTs in the classroom for students with and without disabilities.

RQ.3 To what extent do children with and without disabilities interact with the ADTs?

In most cases, students interacted with projected versions of the ADTs, using a smart board or television. Due to limited access to digital devices, most students did not access the ADTs independently. There was one case where tablets were provided for individual use, and while students accessed the ADTs, independent navigation was uncommon. They relied on teacher guidance to navigate the content and accessibility features, as they were not yet familiar with the new technology.

Most students engaged in the activities included in the ADTs, though with varying degrees of attention and focus. Most students remained focused throughout the sessions. Those with intellectual disabilities were captivated by the colours, while for those with autism the audio narration served as a powerful stimulus. However, a few students, particularly those with more severe autism or intellectual disabilities, required additional assistance from teachers, as they struggled to stay calm and focused.

“A girl with Down syndrome was not paying attention, but when she heard the audio with the story’s narration, she became attentive.”

Local consultant

“One student with autism stayed with their support person the whole time, who helped them when he stood up.”

Local consultant

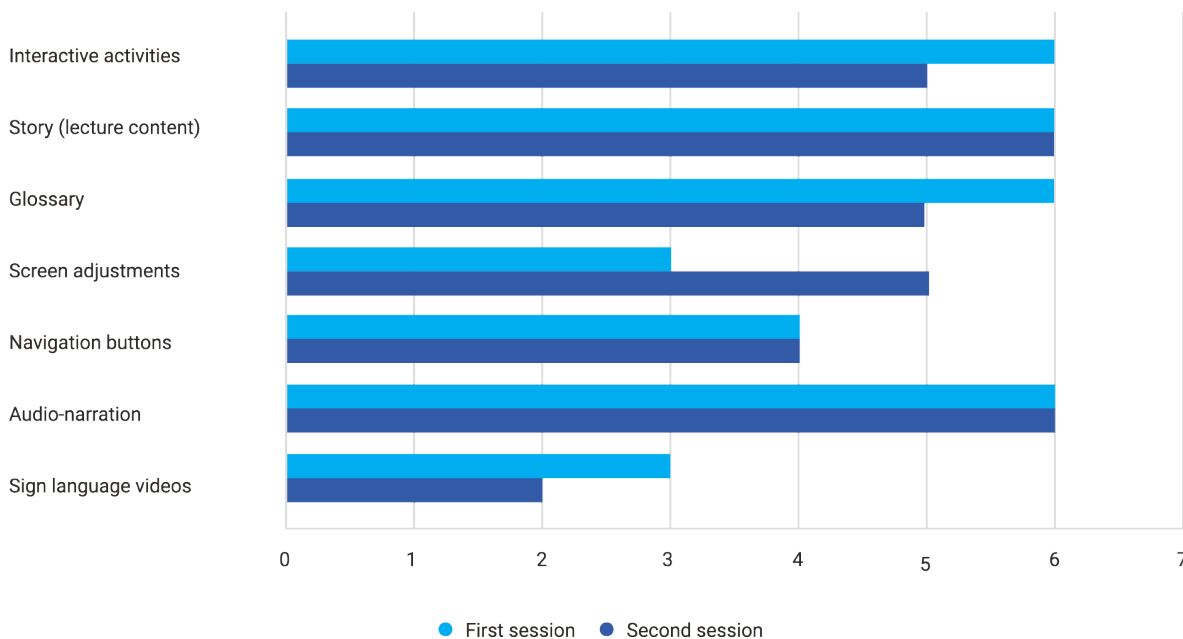
Students also showed considerable interest in the ADTs and attempted collaborative work. Students with intellectual disabilities enthusiastically repeated story words, while those with autism used supplementary materials like real objects to engage with the story. However, a student with hearing disabilities required teacher assistance, especially with sign language interpretation. Collaborative interaction was limited in the first session but improved throughout the second session.

RQ.4 To what extent do teachers use ADTs to foster inclusion in the classroom?

In most cases, teachers facilitated the use of the ADTs through a projected version. Teachers found these made classes more attractive and motivating, and mentioned their interest in continuing to use the new technology in the classroom. Outside the activities included in the ADTs, non-digital methods such as crafts, performances and games were implemented to enrich the learning experience for all students and provide specific support for those with intellectual disabilities and autism.

Teachers used the audio-narration feature to guide the stories, alongside the navigation buttons, story-specific activities and glossary feature. These practices significantly enhanced interactive learning experiences and addressed the diverse access needs and learning preferences of the children in the classroom, including students with disabilities. To support students with intellectual disabilities and autism, teachers adapted the content by simplifying language, providing visual aids and offering guided assistance within the ADTs to facilitate participation and comprehension.

Figure 2: ADTs’ features used by teachers



Number of teachers (n) = 6

Teachers found using the ADTs either easy or neutral, and provided valuable feedback to improve and ease their integration into regular teaching practices. Difficulties were reported with the offline versions and adjusting screen contrasts, suggesting the need for a zoom feature for text. Some teachers also expressed an interest in expanding this tool to other texts. They also emphasized the importance of using real objects for students with intellectual disabilities, as well as visual aids such as pictograms for students with autism.

Additionally, teachers felt confident using ADTs, though they needed assistance due to a lack of function in offline versions and inadequate internet connectivity for the online version. They effectively used the ADTs to guide the class, offering spontaneous individual assistance to students with disabilities by adjusting activities and ensuring comprehension through additional tasks. Teachers also encouraged student collaboration by celebrating their achievements and fostering their engagement in the lesson.

IV. Conclusion

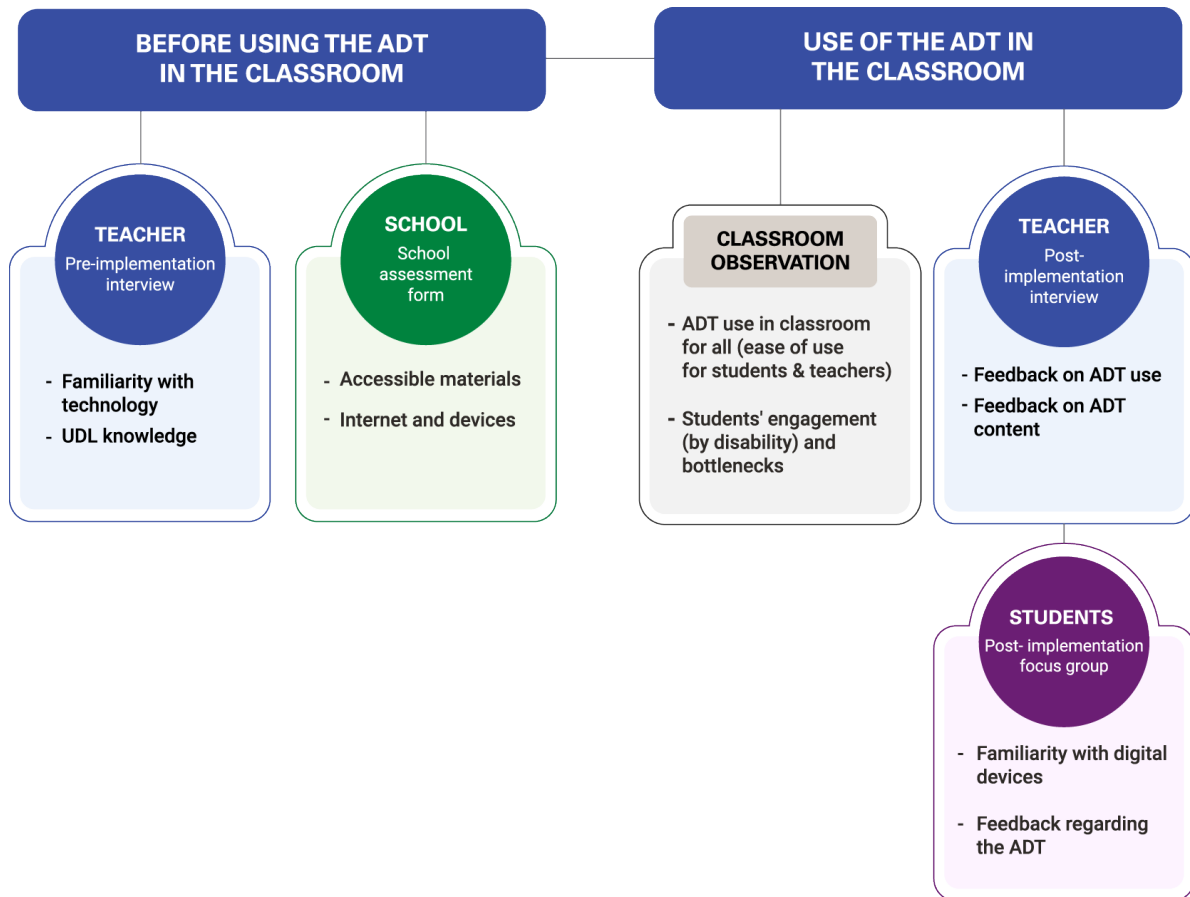
The pilot, supported by two key education policies, showed that ADTs can be useful tools to support teachers in their lessons for children with and without disabilities. However, it also highlighted ongoing challenges related to technical, pedagogical and ICT infrastructure. Teachers indicated that all children, particularly those with intellectual disabilities and autism, were more focused and more enthusiastic when using the new technology, facilitating the incorporation of inclusive practices in the classroom. Teachers also provided feedback to better incorporate accessible digital learning materials into their teaching practices, which complemented their prior training on UDL and inclusive education.

As for the challenges, recommendations are provided below to inform tangible actions in the following areas:

- **Consider improving ICT infrastructure and its management in schools, particularly internet connectivity to ease online navigation in the classroom.** Despite the availability of digital devices in most schools, they are not used regularly. Schools need support to effectively manage devices and promote digital learning. This requires device management plans covering maintenance, monitoring, ICT support and scheduling of technology use. Budgets should account for one-time and recurring ICT costs. Poor internet connectivity in pilot schools further hinders online learning tools and digital platforms.
- **Provide teachers with further practical training on how to use the ADTs with children with and without disabilities.** Teachers have shown their proficiency in using the new technology through both instructions and demonstrations. Therefore, these opportunities should enhance their understanding and skills in integrating ADTs into their teaching methods. This integration aims to address diverse access needs and learning preferences, fostering inclusive classrooms, improving pedagogical techniques and leveraging technology for inclusive education.
- **For technology developers, there are a few ways to improve the functionality and capability of the ADTs and similar tools.** Teachers that participated in the pilot recommended optimizing ADTs by incorporating a zoom-in feature for text, enhancing image-background contrast and improving the functionality of the offline versions to better address the current ICT infrastructure challenges faced by schools throughout the country. Additionally, based on classroom observations, both teachers and students could benefit from additional functionalities that adapt the educational content to students' levels, such as simplified text options.

Annex

Annex I: Data collection plan: Implementation research methodology



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UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight tackles the questions of greatest importance for children, both current and emerging. It drives change through research and foresight on a wide range of child rights issues, sparking global discourse and actively engaging young people in its work.

UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision-makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represents the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development. The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

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Make
Mothers
Matter

February 2026

MMM ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE MOTHERS' ROLE AND RIGHTS

Climate Change: A Maternal Physical and Mental Health Emergency

In the lead-up to the [UN Climate Change Conference \(COP30\)](#) in Belém, Brazil, Make Mothers Matter (MMM) collaborated with **Dr. Saravanan Thangarajan**, a Visiting Scientist and faculty member at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, to develop a *Policy Brief* on a critical yet neglected issue in climate discussions and financing: maternal health.

Co-authored with the MMM UN Advocacy Team, the *Policy Brief* shed light on **the climate change impact on maternal mental health**, in particular, **which is completely overlooked**. It is an urgent **call to integrate maternal and newborn health into climate policy and adaptation strategies**.

Climate change – an escalating threat to maternal and newborn health

Rising temperatures, worsening air quality, food insecurity, displacement, and resource scarcity all endanger women and infants. These environmental stressors are linked to preterm birth, low birth weight, and stillbirth, and they exacerbate existing health inequities.

Pregnancy increases the core body temperature and blood volume, making women more vulnerable to heat. Each 1°C rise during late pregnancy can raise the risk of stillbirth by up to 10%. Infants, who cannot regulate body temperature effectively, face increased risks of dehydration, respiratory distress, and death.

The overlooked mental health crisis

The impacts of climate change extend beyond the physical. Environmental stressors heighten maternal anxiety, depression and trauma, especially in low- and middle-income countries where health systems are already strained.

Globally, 10% of pregnant women and 13% of new mothers experience a mental disorder, mostly depression rates, which climb even higher in poorer regions and in the context of crises such as climate change. Severe cases can lead to suicide, while even moderate distress affects breastfeeding, caregiving and child development.

Despite being treatable, maternal mental health remains largely absent from national adaptation plans and climate finance.

Climate inequities and unpaid care

Climate change deepens gender and social inequities, particularly through its impact on unpaid care work. Women perform 76% of all unpaid care globally, and climate shocks further expand these responsibilities, requiring more time for fetching water, caring for the sick and managing household survival.

Low-income and marginalised communities, often exposed to extreme heat, poor housing and weak health infrastructure, bear the heaviest costs. In these contexts, caring for a newborn becomes an act of endurance under worsening environmental and economic stress.

A call for policy action

In 2023, WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA jointly urged governments to integrate maternal and newborn health into national climate adaptation plans.

Yet, less than 0.5% of multilateral climate finance currently targets health, and maternal mental health remains completely neglected. Redirecting climate finance towards maternal and child health is both an urgent moral duty and a sound economic investment.

Proven solutions already exist. From solar-powered health clinics and digital tracking in India to innovative tools like CliMent, which uses climate and behavioural data to detect maternal distress, practical models are available and scalable.

MMM’s call: Five priorities for action

1. **Integrate climate risks into maternal and newborn health services.**
2. **Scale investment in maternal mental health within adaptation and emergency plans.**
3. **Strengthen health infrastructure for climate resilience.**
4. **Support grassroots innovations that deliver local, rapid impact.**
5. **Redirect climate finance to health, beginning with maternal and child well-being.**



Investing in mothers is investing in the future

Protecting mothers is investing in and protecting the future. Climate justice is incomplete without caregiving justice. Empowering mothers and embedding maternal health, physical and mental, into climate action and finance is not charity; it is the cornerstone of climate resilience and intergenerational well-being.

**CLIMATE CHANGE:
A MATERNAL, PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY**

Climate change is an escalating threat to maternal and newborn health. While extreme heat is already linked to poor health outcomes for both mothers and newborns, a broader set of environmental stressors, including air pollution, natural disasters, food insecurity, resource scarcity and displacement, also pose serious risks. These environmental stressors are increasingly recognised as amplifiers of existing maternal mental health vulnerabilities, exacerbating risks of anxiety, depression (including postpartum depression), and trauma that can compromise both maternal well-being and infant development. Yet, maternal mental health remains largely absent from climate policy. As the crisis deepens, it is critical to embed mental health, maternal care, and heat resilience into national climate adaptation strategies.

📖 Read the *Policy Brief* [here](#).



WWW.MAKEMOTHERSMATTER.ORG

MMM @ the Second World Summit on Social Development – Rethinking Development: Care and Social Protection at the Core

On 3 November 2025, MMM hosted a virtual *Solution Session* at the [Second UN World Summit on Social Development](#) titled *Shifting the Paradigm: Centring Care Society and Social Protection for Social Development*. As the unequal distribution of unpaid care and support, borne largely by women and marginalised groups, continues to undermine global development commitments, **the event called for care and support to be recognised as essential social infrastructure, integrated with social protection, and central to building equitable, resilient and inclusive societies.**

Organised in collaboration with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR), CIPPEC, the Global Alliance for Care and the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors (GCSPF), the event also featured Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

MMM’s objective was to shed light on the links between care and social development, framing it as a cross-cutting issue, and highlighting in particular the key role of universal social protection and social protection floors in building strong care and support systems to create caring, resilient and inclusive societies and realise the vision of the commitments of the *Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development*.

Key messages from the event

1. **Care and support are essential pillars of social development, underpinning health, education, decent work, and social cohesion.** Investing in care generates multiplier effects comparable to, and often exceeding, traditional infrastructure.
2. **The unequal distribution of unpaid care is both a driver and consequence of gender inequality,** limiting women's labour force participation, financial autonomy and physical and mental health.
3. **Integrated care and support systems are achievable, as demonstrated by pioneering models in Latin America.** These systems strengthen social protection, reduce poverty and promote gender-responsive development.
4. **Care must be recognised, legislated, financed and institutionalised as a human right,** following recent human rights frameworks affirming the rights of caregivers and care recipients.

🔗 An exhaustive report of the event as well as its full recording are available [here](#).

MMM Written Statement to 64th UN Commission on Social Development

The following is a short version. 🔗 MMM's full statement to CSocD64 is available [here](#).

Unpaid care work, carried out disproportionately by women – particularly mothers, is essential to sustaining life, families and economies. Yet it remains largely invisible in public policy, undervalued in national budgets, and absent from legal frameworks. This invisibility has real and lasting consequences, including economic insecurity, time poverty and intergenerational cycles of inequality, especially for women who are already marginalised.

Advancing social justice requires transforming how care is recognised, organised and supported. This means moving from fragmented support to coordinated systems, from narrow solutions to intersectional design, and from individual to collective responsibility.

Examples of good practice exist

- In Uruguay, the National Integrated Care System establishes care as a legal right and provides coordinated services for children, older adults, persons with disabilities, and their caregivers. Supported by a national framework, the system ensures continuity across political cycles and enables civil society participation in shaping priorities.
- In Bogotá, the District Care System, designed inclusively through dialogue with more than 5,500 women, reimagines urban space by placing care at the centre of local planning. Its Care Blocks bring services together in one location, while mobile units extend access to underserved areas. Importantly, the system also invests in cultural transformation, including initiatives that engage men in caregiving roles.

While these systems are not perfect, they demonstrate what is possible when care is treated as a right, a public good and a shared societal responsibility.

Intersectionality is essential

No care system can be truly inclusive unless it actively addresses intersectionality. Single mothers, migrant women, women with disabilities, and caregivers in rural or informal settings face overlapping and compounding disadvantages. A one-size-fits-all approach cannot respond to these diverse realities. Care policies must be adapted to reach and support those most often excluded.

Care systems as accelerators of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Integrated and intersectional care systems are also powerful accelerators of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly:

- SDG 5 – Gender equality
- SDG 3 – Good health and well-being
- SDG 4 – Quality education
- SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth
- SDG 10 – Reduced inequalities
- SDG 11 – Sustainable cities and communities

Despite these clear links, care remains underrepresented in national SDG strategies – representing a significant missed opportunity.

Our call for action

To advance social justice through inclusive and coordinated policies, MMM calls on Member States and relevant institutions to:

1. Recognise care as a right

Officially recognise the right to give and receive care by integrating care into national laws, development plans, and social protection systems, ensuring public support for caregiving throughout the life course.

2. Create and fund public care services

Invest in high-quality, accessible care services, including childcare, elder care, disability, respite care, parental leave and caregiver training. Services should be free or affordable, widely available, and responsive to diverse needs.

3. Ensure care systems are inclusive for all

Design care policies with particular attention to those most at risk of exclusion, such as single mothers, migrant women, people with disabilities, and those in rural or informal settings. Services must be accessible, culturally appropriate, and adaptable.

4. Include caregivers and communities in decision-making

Create formal mechanisms to ensure that caregivers and care recipients – especially women and marginalised groups – participate meaningfully in shaping care policies. Governments should create formal spaces where their voices are heard, and their knowledge helps guide decisions.

5. Promote shared responsibility for care

Support education, public campaigns, and programmes that encourage men and boys to take on caregiving roles, challenge harmful gender norms and promote equality within families and communities.

6. Integrate care into SDG strategies

Explicitly include care in national SDG implementation plans by setting measurable targets, allocating dedicated funding and ensuring coordination across government ministries.

A more just future depends on transforming how we value and support care. By building integrated and inclusive care systems, we do not merely shift responsibilities away from individual women – we reshape social contracts around shared responsibility, dignity and equity.

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: Strengthening Support for Mothers

Make Mothers Matter contributed to the European Commission's consultation for the renewed Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The Pillar brings together 20 principles and rights essential to create a fair, sustainable and well-functioning European Union until 2030. The three main targets for this Action Plan are: increasing employment rates to at least 78%; ensuring 60% of adults participate in training every year; reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million.

MMM welcomed the new Action Plan's objectives and placed particular emphasis on the measures that are of direct importance to mothers, such as its plans to halve the gender employment gap, increase the provision of formal early childhood education and care, and map best practices for recognising care-related career breaks in pension schemes.

Since the last Action Plan, several important initiatives have been launched: the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 introduced the [work-life balance directive](#) and the [pay transparency directive](#); the 2021 [European Child Guarantee](#) was adopted to fight child poverty and exclusion; and the [European Care Strategy](#) reinforced commitments through the Council Recommendations on the [Barcelona Targets on childcare](#) and on [long-term care](#). In 2025, the [Roadmap for women's rights](#) was introduced, highlighting persistent gaps and setting out key priorities such as equal pay, work-life balance, and the recognition of care as central to gender equality. Recently, the European Commission launched a public consultation to define the first [EU Anti-Poverty Strategy](#), aiming to tackle root causes through stronger social protection, inclusive labour markets, and accessible services.

Despite this progress, MMM stressed that much more needs to be done to put mothers and care work at the centre of EU policy-making. For its position paper, MMM has made recommendations and highlighted best practices for the nine pillars that affect mothers the most. For the others, MMM, as a member of the [Social Platform](#), has joined forces in a common [contribution](#).

Education, training and lifelong learning: Care responsibilities and household duties are **key obstacles** for women within the labour market. MMM demanded to: recognise and validate caregiving skills gained through maternity; support mothers' reintegration into work after childcare break.

Gender equality: Unpaid care work should be **recognised, reduced and redistributed** to close the gender care, pay and pension gaps. MMM recommended to: establish EU-wide care credits for pensions; expand affordable, high-quality childcare; enable fathers to take leave through better pay, time and cultural support, while also recognising grandparents' and extended family roles in childcare.

Active support for employment: Motherhood often forces women to reduce their hours or change their work status. This can lead to women losing **financial independence**. MMM demanded to: establish EU-level quality job targets for mothers; raise awareness and enforce protections against pregnancy discrimination.

Work-life balance: MMM's [State of Motherhood in Europe 2024](#) survey shows that many mothers are dissatisfied with the length and compensation of maternity leave, and over 25% report negative career impacts linked to motherhood. Fathers' uptake of leave remains limited, largely due to insufficient compensation, cultural expectations, and inflexible arrangements. MMM recommended to: extend minimum maternity, paternity and parental leave, and guaranteed flexible working arrangements for parents, as well as increased pay for parental leave to at least sick-pay level.

Childcare and support for children: Since 2019, poverty in the EU has only decreased by 1.6 million people, while child poverty has actually risen. The European Child Guarantee, established in 2021, explicitly recognises children in precarious family situations as being at heightened risk of poverty and social exclusion. MMM demanded: affordable, high-quality childcare across the EU as well as support to parents choosing in-family

care, and investment in community-based care initiatives; the extension of career-break schemes to support work-family reconciliation.

Old-age income and pensions: The gender pension gap, currently at 26%, penalises mothers for their caregiving contributions. MMM therefore recommended to: recognise care periods through pension credits and improve access to childcare and parental leave; provide adequate minimum pensions.

Healthcare: Childbearing and care responsibilities impact the **mental and physical health of mothers**. Maternal mental health is an urgent but under-recognised issue with **intergenerational consequences**. MMM therefore urged the EU to: guarantee universal, affordable and non-discriminatory maternal healthcare; invest in integrated perinatal and mental health services with systematic screening.

Inclusion of people with disabilities: Mothers with disabilities face the demands of raising children, but also the complexities of navigating their own needs in a world that is often **physically, socially and structurally inaccessible**. Additionally, these women often face **stigma and discouragement** in becoming mothers. It is essential to: integrate disability awareness into healthcare training; strengthen legal protections and provide adequate resources; guarantee physical accessibility, adaptive equipment and assistive technology.

Housing and assistance for the homeless: Women, especially single mothers, migrant and refugee women, and women with disabilities, face heightened risks of **poverty, housing insecurity and hidden homelessness** and are more vulnerable to **exploitation and abuse**. To address this, the EU should: develop a European affordable housing plan that includes mothers; strengthen minimum income schemes and targeted measures for vulnerable groups; combine child support, accessible childcare and financial supplements for single mothers.

🔗 Access the *Policy Paper* [here](#). 🔗 Access the *Policy Brief* [here](#).

Recognising Mothers, Reducing Poverty: A Call for an Inclusive EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

MMM contributed to the [European Commission's first comprehensive Anti-Poverty Strategy](#) calling for bold, inclusive action to ensure it benefits those who need it most – especially mothers. MMM's contribution highlighted the **structural inequalities faced by mothers across the European Union**, examining the barriers that prevent them from fully participating in social and economic life. It also provided concrete recommendations for strengthening support systems in **health, education and social protection**.

Despite progress in gender equality, mothers across Europe continue to face systemic disadvantages rooted in the unequal distribution of unpaid care work and persistent labour market discrimination. Across Europe, millions of women and families experience poverty and social exclusion, with single mothers, caregivers, and other vulnerable women being among the most affected. These economic pressures reverberate through families and communities, deepening cycles of disadvantage.

An effective EU Anti-Poverty Strategy must be **rights-based and intersectional**, addressing the multiple dimensions of poverty and the specific challenges mothers face. It should also recognise the social and economic **value of unpaid care work and the wide range of skills mothers develop**. Through caregiving, mothers acquire a wealth of soft skills – including empathy, multitasking, time management, leadership and conflict resolution – all of which enhance employability, personal growth and social inclusion, and strengthen both society and the economy.

MMM called for these competencies to be recognised and validated through innovative tools such as those developed in the EU-funded projects like [MAV](#) and [MothersCan](#), which contribute to making these often invisible skills visible and valued in the workplace.

Most importantly, the strategy must **prevent and reduce poverty at every stage of life**, ensuring that no mother or child is left behind and that mothers' essential contributions are properly recognised and valued.

Families are the cornerstone of nurturing care for children and the foundation of social cohesion. Addressing mothers' **poverty** and ensuring they are supported – economically, socially and emotionally – is essential to achieving the EU's gender equality goals and the broader Sustainable Development Goals.

🔗 Access the *Policy Paper* [here](#). 🔗 Access the *Policy Brief* [here](#).

Compiled by Irina Pálffy-Daun-Seiler, MMM Representative to the United Nations in Vienna, with input from Valérie Bichelmeier, Vice-President and Head of Advocacy at the UN (Switzerland), and Johanna Schima, Vice-President and Head of Advocacy at the EU (Belgium).

Recent & Upcoming Events

March

- 9.-10. in London, United Kingdom: 20. International Conference on Reproductive Health and Family Planning

<https://waset.org/reproductive-health-and-family-planning-conference-in-march-2026-in-london>

- 30.-31. in Paris, France: 20. International Conference on Child, Adolescent and Family Behavioral Health

<https://waset.org/child-adolescent-and-family-behavioral-health-conference-in-march-2026-in-paris>

April

- 6.-7. in Seoul, Korea, South: 20. International Conference on Family Nursing

<https://waset.org/family-nursing-conference-in-april-2026-in-seoul>

- 26.-27. in Athens, Greece: 20. International Conference on Psychology of Family

<https://waset.org/psychology-of-family-conference-in-april-2026-in-athens>

May

- 4.-5. in Istanbul, Türkiye: 20. International Conference on Family Nursing

<https://waset.org/family-nursing-conference-in-may-2026-in-istanbul>

- 18.-19. in Vancouver, Canada: 20. International Conference on Reproductive Health and Family Planning

<https://waset.org/reproductive-health-and-family-planning-conference-in-may-2026-in-vancouver>

- 25.-26. in Barcelona, Spain: 20. International Conference on Family Nursing

<https://waset.org/family-nursing-conference-in-may-2026-in-barcelona>

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