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Graduate-Level Social Work Class – UAB

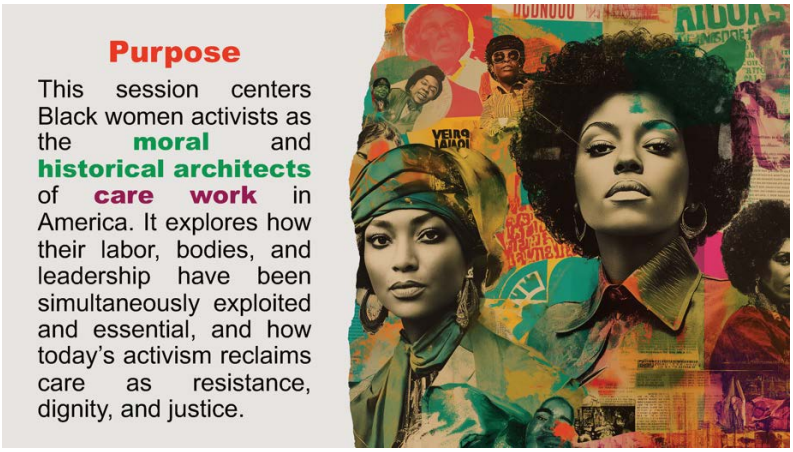
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Alabama Institute for Social Justice (AISJ) & The Alabama Movement for Child Care (TAMCC)

Topic: Black Women Activists: Reclaiming the Meaning of Care

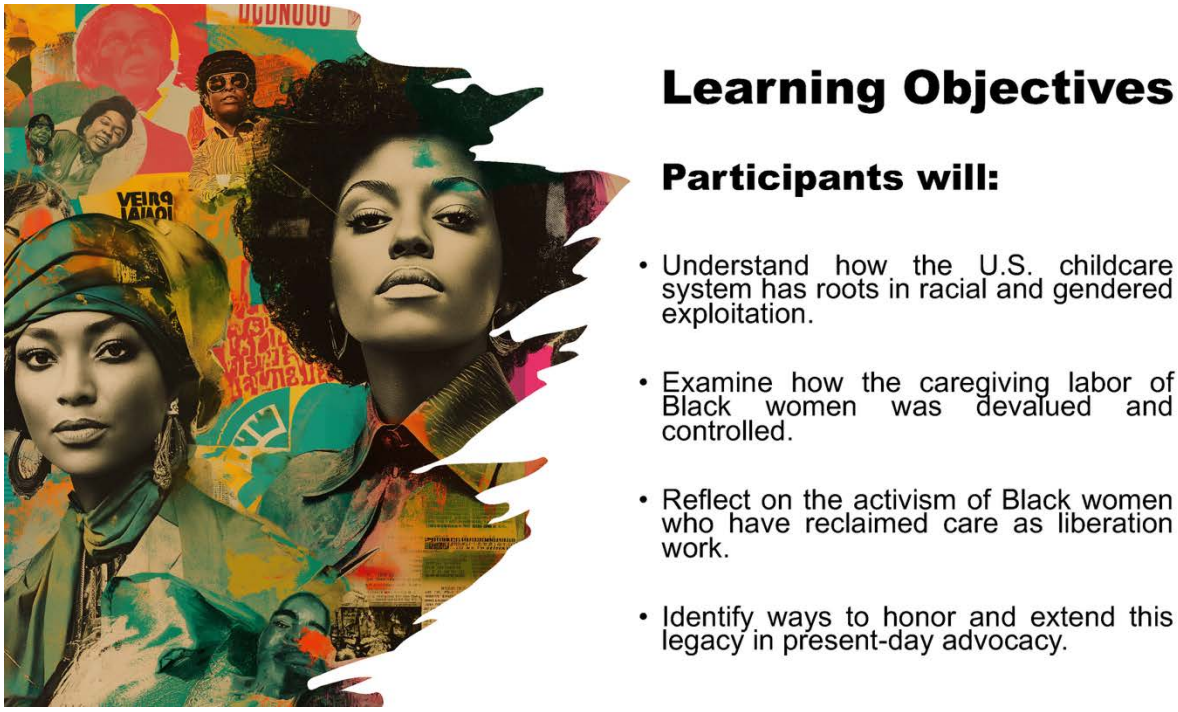


Purpose



This session centers Black women activists as the moral and historical architects of care work in America. It explores how their labor, bodies, and leadership have been simultaneously exploited and essential — and how today's activism reclaims care as resistance, dignity, and justice.

Learning Objectives



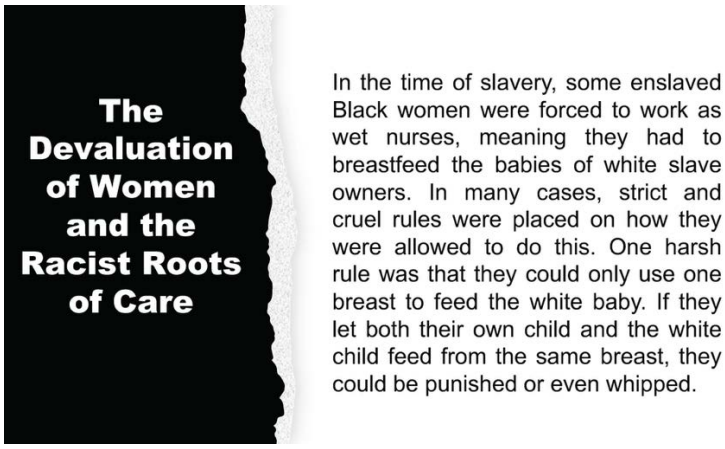
Participants will:

1. Understand how the U.S. childcare system has roots in racial and gendered exploitation.
2. Examine how the caregiving labor of Black women was devalued and controlled.
3. Reflect on the activism of Black women who have reclaimed care as liberation work.
4. Identify ways to honor and extend this legacy in present-day advocacy.

Opening Reflection:

When I think of care, the faces that come to mind are both intimate and ordinary: the grandmother who rose before dawn to prepare breakfast, the neighbor who sat with a grieving friend through the night, the childcare worker whose day began with changing diapers and ended with lesson songs. Historically, however, who has been expected to care, and who has been cared for, are not neutral facts but social arrangements. Care has been expected of women first and foremost, and disproportionately of women of color; those who received care were most often those with social, political, or economic power. This pattern reveals that care is not simply a private virtue but a structured, unequal labor—emotional and physical work that has been racialized, gendered, and habitually taken for granted.

Historical Context: The Devaluation of Women and the Racist Roots of Care.



When we speak of care, we often imagine tenderness: a hand steadying a fevered brow, a lullaby, a morning meal. But this intimacy has a history that is brutal and deliberate. From the plantation through Reconstruction and into our modern labor markets, the American care economy was built on the bodies and labor of Black women. Enslaved women were compelled to serve as wet nurses, household servants, and field workers — not by choice but by law and by force. The intimate violence of this history is stark: enslaved Black women were often forced to breastfeed white infants while their own children went hungry or unattended. In some households the grotesque policy forbidding a white infant and a Black infant from nursing from the same breast—despite that milk coming from one body—was a deliberate symbolic act of racial hierarchy and domination. They were made to nurture white children while their own infants went hungry or were even taken away.





What does this image reveal about how America has historically viewed care work and the bodies that perform it?

We must call this what it is: grotesque. To see milk, labor, and love turned into instruments of domination is to confront the naked mechanics of power — how intimacy can be weaponized and how private acts can be woven into public injustice. That recognition shifts our responsibility. If care is the foundation of any functioning society, then its distribution cannot be left to patterns forged by violence and inequality.

This was not occasional cruelty; it was systematic. The same social order that permitted sexual violence, family separations, and the sale of human beings also normalized the extraction of maternal labor as routine. After emancipation, politics and policy often cemented these hierarchies rather than erasing them: Black women were steered into domestic work

and agriculture, labor protections excluded many care workers, and public investment in care infrastructure was neglected. The result is not only historical injury but an enduring economy in which care is undervalued and racialized.

I contend that this image shows that care was simultaneously essential and disposable. Black women's maternal labor was commodified to preserve white families and reproductions of social order, while Black motherhood itself was devalued and denied dignity. This history established a durable logic: care that supports those in power can be coerced, underpaid, or rendered invisible, while the people who do it are stigmatized or marginalized.

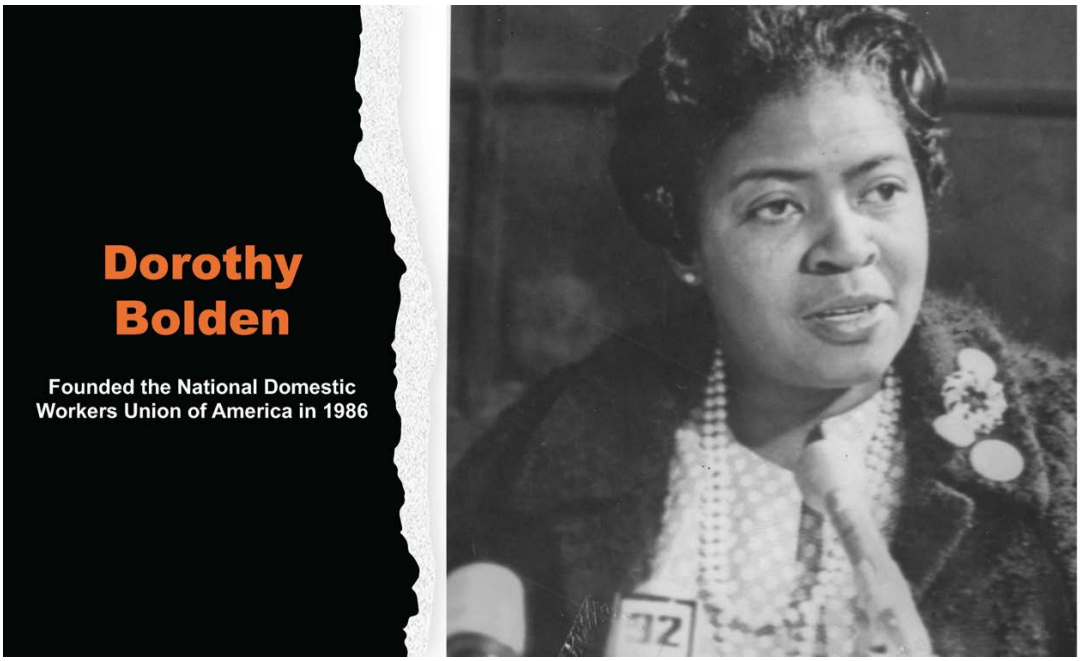
That logic echoes today in the undervalued childcare system. Childcare workers—disproportionately women of color—earn low wages, often lack benefits, and face precarious working conditions. Public policy treats early childhood education and family care as optional or private matters rather than foundational infrastructure. Subsidies are inadequate, licensing and reimbursement rates are low, and investments in community-based care networks are inconsistent. The result is what scholars call a "care crisis": essential labor underwritten by public neglect and private sacrifice.

So let us remake the terms. Recognize the work and humanity of caregivers; extend labor protections, living wages, and benefits to those who sustain our families; invest in public care institutions so caregiving is not a private sacrifice but a shared civic responsibility; and confront the historical injustices that made care a prop of inequality. Only by naming the grotesque and undoing its legacies can we begin to build a care economy that honors dignity, not domination.

The Central Role of Black Women Activists:

If exploitation has been a thread in this history, so too has resistance. Black women have repeatedly transformed care into political power: organizing labor, building alternative institutions, and theorizing care as collective liberation.

- **Dorothy Bolden** organized domestic workers to assert labor rights and dignity.



- **Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative** included childcare as a central piece of community self-determination.



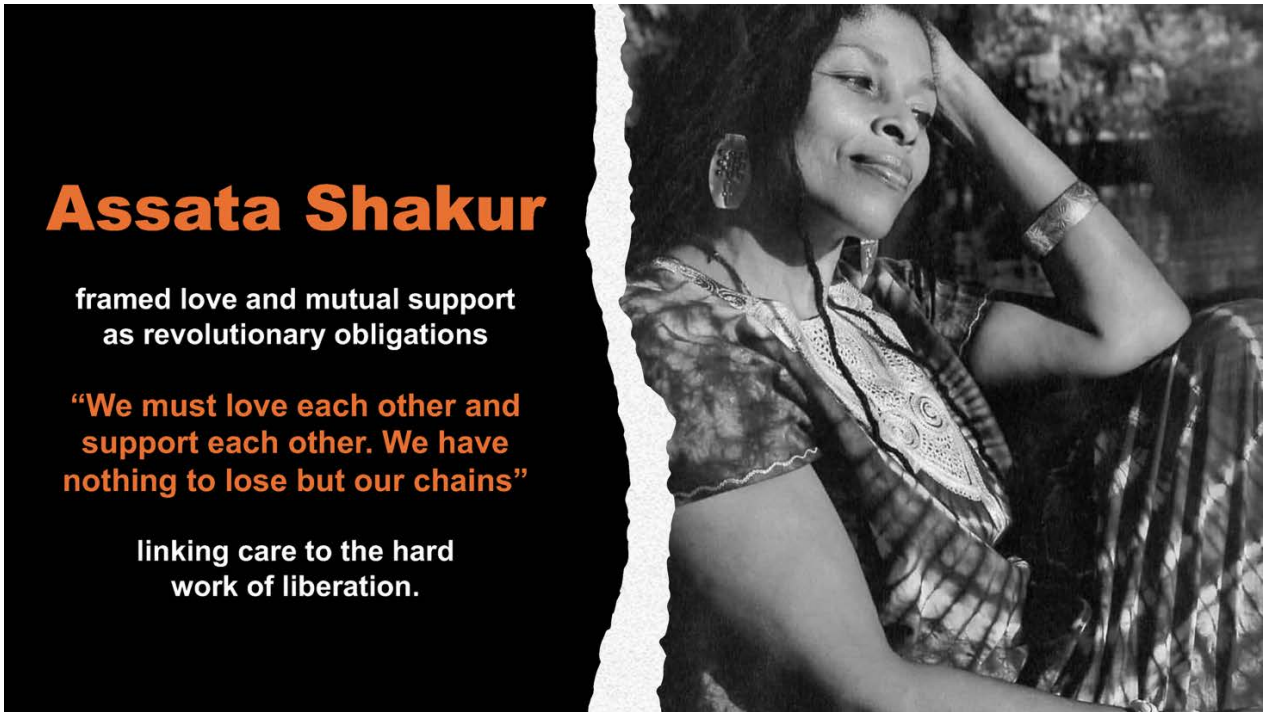
- **Septima Clark and Ella Baker** taught that nurturing, educating, and organizing were inseparable acts of freedom.



Mentioned in reference to photo of Setptima Clark with Rosa Parks: The Highlander Research and Education Center - *The Highlander Research and Education Center, formerly*

known as the Highlander Folk School, is a social justice leadership training school and cultural center in New Market, Tennessee.

- **Assata Shakur** framed love and mutual support as revolutionary obligations—"We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains"—linking care to the hard work of liberation.



"How have Black women's care practices always been political—even revolutionary?"



Begin with a truth that is often obscured: care is not merely private kindness; for Black women in the United States, it has long been a deliberate, collective, political practice that made survival possible and laid the groundwork for freedom. From slavery to the present, Black women converted day-to-day acts of care into institutions, movements, and demands that refused to let life be solely shaped by systems of domination.

Consider the history in a few clear frames.

1) Care under duress, and care as covert resistance:



Under slavery, Black women's caregiving—nursing, nursing others' children, tending the sick, sharing food and knowledge—was inflicted and exploited, but it also became a means of sustaining kin and building networks of mutual aid that could not be fully policed by owners (see Deborah Gray White, Ar'n't I a Woman?; Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow). Even in the face of rape, family separations, and forced wet-nursing, women preserved languages, foods, medicines, and stories that made collective survival and future resistance possible (Saidiya Hartman, Scenes of Subjection; Danielle McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street).

2) Mutual aid made institutional:



After emancipation and through Jim Crow, Black women formalized those survival practices into organizations: benevolent societies, burial clubs, day nurseries, literacy programs, and

women's clubs that provided schooling, childcare, and social services denied by segregated public systems. The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs—rooted in the motto "Lifting as We Climb"—is a paradigmatic example of how domestic labor became public institution and political leverage (Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent).

3) Care as labor organizing and economic strategy:



Black women translated caregiving into explicit labor struggle. Domestic workers and other care laborers organized for wages, recognition, and legal protection—turning private labor into collective bargaining power. Dorothy Bolden and others organized domestic workers in the mid-twentieth century to challenge the invisibility and precarity of their work; later efforts, from union drives to cooperatives, continued to reframe care as work deserving of rights and protections (Jacqueline Jones; primary union histories).

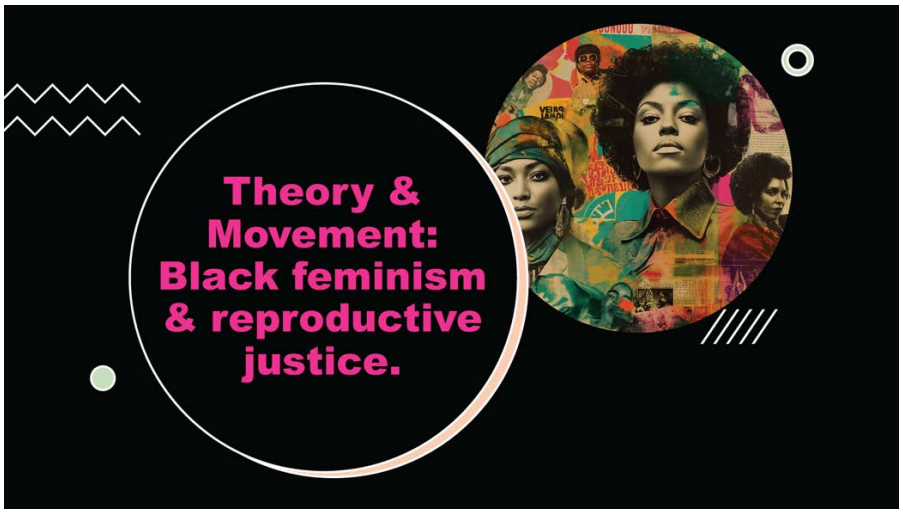
4) Care as community self-defense and political education:



Care practices also built movement infrastructure. Freedom Schools, community childcare projects, the Black Panthers' free breakfast programs and health clinics, and Freedom Farm cooperatives were not incidental acts of benevolence; they were strategies to sustain communities, teach political literacy, and demonstrate alternatives to racist state neglect (Joshua Bloom & Waldo E. Martin Jr., Black Against Empire; Kay Mills, This Little Light of Mine on Fannie Lou Hamer). These programs trained leaders, cultivated solidarity, and

modeled modes of social reproduction that contested the systems that produced vulnerability.

5) Theory and movement: Black feminism and reproductive justice:



Black feminist thought made the politics of care explicit. The Combahee River Collective's analysis insisted that the personal is political, arguing that caring labor and family survival are central to understanding and dismantling oppression (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977). Contemporary reproductive-justice frameworks, led by women of color, link bodily autonomy to the social supports—childcare, healthcare, economic stability—necessary for true freedom (see scholar activists in the reproductive justice movement).

6) A living lineage into our present:



This is not only history. Today Black women sustain mutual-aid networks, community fridges, childcare co-ops, and restorative-justice circles; they are central to movements like Black Lives Matter, which explicitly center care as strategy—tending organizers, supporting grieving families, and building alternative publics (Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the

#BlackLivesMatter Movement"). During crises—hurricanes, economic collapse, pandemics—Black women's organizing has repeatedly filled the gaps left by public failure and demonstrated models of collective flourishing.

Why call these practices revolutionary?



- **They remake dependency into power:** by organizing childcare, cooperatives, and unions, caregivers transform exploited labor into leverage.

- **They create parallel institutions:** when the state fails, communities build schools, clinics, and food systems that reveal other possible arrangements.

- **They produce political subjectivity:** through daily teaching and tending, women cultivate leaders and political imaginaries rooted in mutual obligation rather than domination.

- **They insist that justice includes social reproduction:** freedom requires safe bodies, stable families, and community investment—not merely the absence of legal discrimination.

If history teaches anything, it is that care is both the ground of social life and a central site of struggle for the meaning of freedom. Honoring this revolutionary lineage requires policy and practice: protect the labor rights of caregivers; invest in public care infrastructures—childcare, eldercare, living wages and benefits for care workers; support community-led institutions; and center care in our political agendas.

We must recognize that when Black women organized childcare, ran clinics, taught children, and fed the hungry, they were not doing charity alone. They were building the scaffolding of resistance and rehearsing a different politics—one in which human interdependence is the

basis of justice. That legacy calls us not only to gratitude but to concrete change: to remake our institutions so that care is visible, valued, and shared.

Selected sources and further reading:



- Deborah Gray White, ***Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*** (Norton, 1985).
- Jacqueline Jones, ***Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*** (Basic Books, 1985).
- Saidiya Hartman, ***Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*** (Oxford University Press, 1997).
- Danielle L. McGuire, ***At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*** (Knopf/Random House, 2010).
- Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, ***Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church***, 1880–1920 (Harvard University Press, 1993).
- **Combahee River Collective Statement** (1977).
- Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., ***Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*** (University of California Press, 2013).
- Kay Mills, ***This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Ham***er (Doubleday, 1993).
- Alicia Garza, ***A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement*** (2014, online essay).

Modern continuations of this tradition—community-led childcare networks across the South and groups like The Alabama Movement for Child Care—position childcare as infrastructure, not charity. Activists today frame childcare as connected to racial, gender, and economic

justice, insisting that public investment and worker protections are necessary for democratic life.

Reclaiming Care as Resistance:

Reclaiming care means refusing the idea that it is merely a feminine duty or a cost center: Care is labor that sustains economies, leadership that builds communities, and resistance that reclaims dignity from systems that once commodified it. Reframe the policy: Treating childcare and eldercare as public infrastructure shifts them from private, precarious obligations into stable, societal goods. That means sustained public funding for universal pre-K and community childcare centers, higher reimbursement rates so providers can operate sustainably, and sliding-scale subsidies so access is based on need rather than income or zip code. Framing care as infrastructure also creates standards—safety, staffing ratios, data collection—that improve quality and normalize long-term investment rather than ad-hoc charity.

- **Raise wages and protections:** Care work must be recognized economically and legally as work deserving of basic labor protections. Guaranteeing living wages, paid sick leave, employer-funded healthcare, and pension access reduces turnover and improves quality; supporting collective bargaining and worker-led cooperatives shifts power from isolated households to organized workplaces where workers set standards, schedules, and pay. These changes correct the longstanding undervaluation of relational labor and make caregiving a sustainable career.

- **Invest in Black-led organizations:** Black women–led community groups have long provided culturally responsive care, mutual aid, and trust in places where public systems have failed. Directing philanthropy and public grants to these organizations—via multi-year funding, capacity building, and reduced bureaucratic barriers—both honors that legacy and leverages proven expertise to scale locally rooted models of care. Such investment strengthens community infrastructure and ensures services meet cultural and linguistic needs.

- **Recognize unpaid labor:** Unpaid caregiving produces measurable economic penalties—lost wages, interrupted careers, and diminished retirement security—that require public redress. Caregiver tax credits, Social Security caregiver credits that count caregiving toward retirement eligibility, and paid family-leave programs compensate and protect those who sustain families outside formal employment. These measures make visible the hidden economy of care and reduce long-term gender and racial wealth gaps.

- **Expand training and career pathways:** Professionalizing care work through accredited training, stackable credentials, apprenticeships, and clear career ladders validates caregiving as skilled labor and creates mobility. Portable credentials, employer-supported continuing education, and partnerships between community colleges and care employers link quality training to better pay and supervisory roles, building a workforce with recognized expertise and pathways into leadership.

- **Address intersecting inequalities:** Care policy cannot be siloed; it must pair with investments in affordable housing, accessible public health, childcare-friendly transit, and

living-wage employment to stabilize families and workers. Tackling childcare deserts requires transit routes timed to shift work, housing near care hubs, and integrated public health services so caregiving is supported by a broader ecosystem rather than left to individual improvisation.

Group Reflection:

What would it mean to honor care work as justice work?





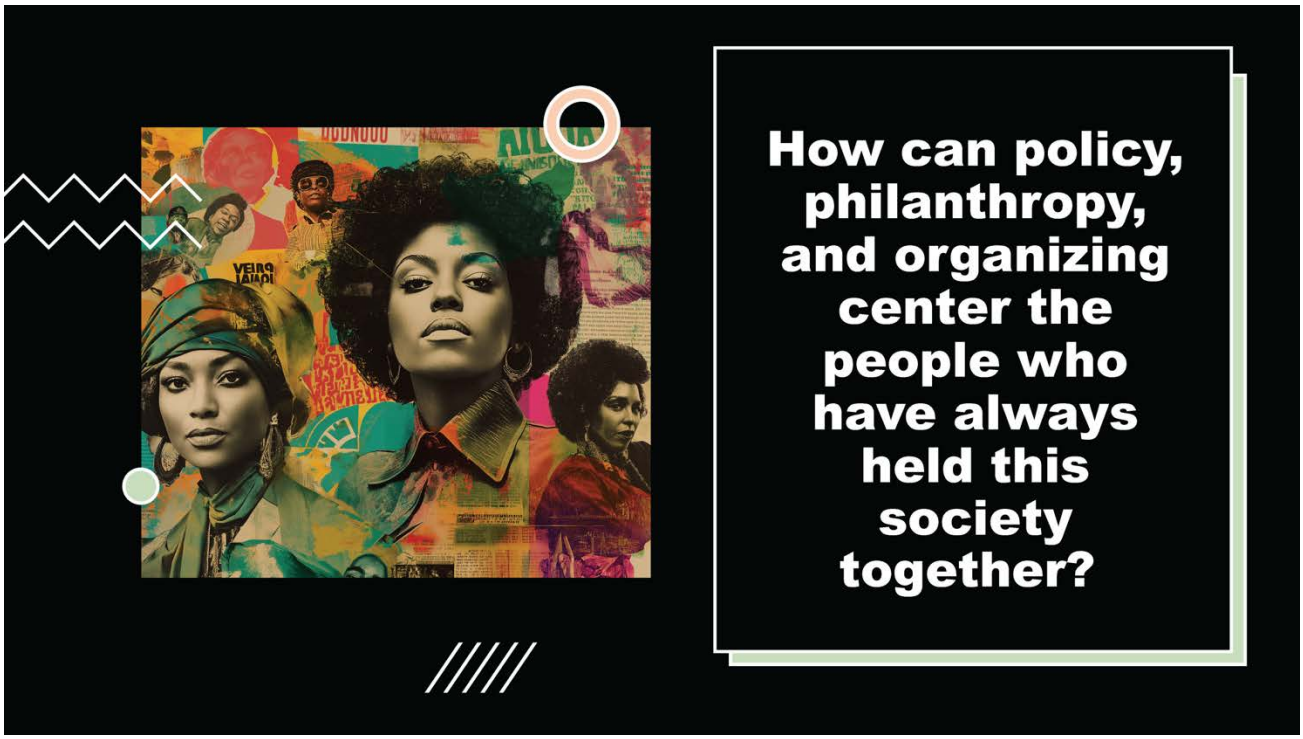
Replace gratitude without recompense with institutional accountability: Gratitude honors intent but does not change material conditions; institutional accountability does. Require equity audits of public spending and contracting to reveal reliance on undervalued care labor, embed enforceable labor standards into any government-funded care program (living wages, benefits, scheduling protections), and build reporting mechanisms and remediation plans when agencies or contractors perpetuate exploitation. Accountability transforms rhetorical praise into measurable obligations that public bodies and private contractors must meet.



Publicize whose labor upholds our communities and reallocate resources accordingly: Make care work visible through public dashboards, workforce data releases, and budget line-items that show who provides care, where, and how they are compensated. Use that transparency to redirect funding—move subsidies and tax breaks away from systems that underpay caregivers and toward sustained operating support for care providers, sliding-scale subsidies for families, and progressive revenue streams that fund universal care infrastructure. Visibility creates political pressure and the factual basis for equitable reallocation.



Let those who have historically done the work set priorities, design programs, and lead institutions: Move from consultation to co-governance by requiring caregiver representation on oversight boards, granting decision-making authority and a guaranteed share of funding to Black women–led and worker-led organizations, and establishing participatory budgeting and program design processes that center lived experience. Invest in leadership pipelines—fellowships, training, and apprenticeships—so caregivers can assume managerial and policy roles, ensuring programs reflect cultural knowledge, workplace realities, and the priorities of the communities they serve.

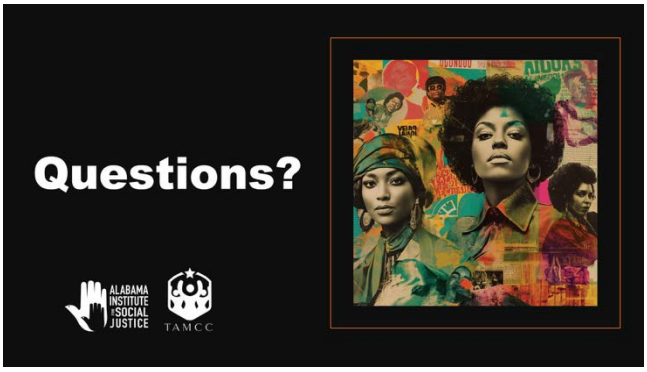


How can policy, philanthropy, and organizing center the people who have always held this society together?

This can be done by funding leadership development for caregivers, structuring grant making to prioritize grassroots organizations, creating participatory budgeting for local care infrastructure, and legislating worker-centered protections. Organizers can amplify the voices and experiences of care workers, build coalitions across labor and racial justice movements, and push for structural reforms that link wages, access, and recognition.

Closing Reflection:





Care is both the substance of survival and a strategy for liberation. As participants in this conversation, consider one concrete way you will continue this legacy. Will you advocate for local childcare funding, donate to a Black-led care cooperative, support a caregiver's right to unionize, or write a policy brief that reframes care as infrastructure? Share one commitment—big or small—that names what part of this legacy you are called to continue. Invite others to hold you accountable and remember that honoring care is not sentimental—it is political, moral, and urgent.