

POLICY BRIEF

Investing in Our Common Future: Building a “Caring” Society

Social Development Policy Brief



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Summary

Developed within the context of the Summit of the Future, the policy brief “Investing in Our Common Future: Building a 'Caring' Society” underscores the importance of valuing unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW) and investing in the care economy for inclusive and sustainable development, economic resilience, and gender equality.

The analysis focuses on three key areas: (a) understanding the care economy and its impact on women's well-being and economic empowerment; (b) examining the economic rationale for investing in the care economy, highlighting its potential for providing economic returns, generating decent employment, and reducing gender disparities; and (c) introducing ESCAP's Model Framework for Action on the Care Economy, providing a practical approach for policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers in establishing comprehensive care systems.

The brief calls on member States to improve data availability, enhance institutional capacities, and foster inter-sectoral coordination to establish effective care systems. It aligns its findings with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Summit of the Future, advocating for a comprehensive approach to promote a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable future.

Keywords:

Care Economy

Gender Equality

Sustainable Development

Summit of the Future



Abbreviations

CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organization
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MFA	Model Framework for Action
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCW	Philippine Commission on Women
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UCDW	Unpaid Care and Domestic Work
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

I: INTRODUCTION

This ESCAP Policy Brief [Investing in our Common Future: Building a ‘Caring’ Society](#), released on the occasion of the Summit of the Future (22 – 23 September 2024), spotlights the importance of valuing unpaid care and domestic work and investing in the care economy. The Summit’s outcome document “Pact for the Future” advocates in Action 8 for significantly increasing “investments to close the gender gap, including in the care and support economy,” and in Action 34 for “dismantling inequalities in the care economy,” emphasizing the significance of the care economy for future generations.¹

The policy brief comprises three substantive sections that make the case for enhanced investment in the care economy: **Understanding the care economy**, **why investing in the care economy matters**, and **how to create comprehensive care systems**.

The first section, *Unpacking the Care Economy*, explains the main tenets of the care economy and describes its importance for the well-being and economic empowerment of women.

The second section, *The Case for Care: Investing in the Care Economy*, includes data and analysis on the economic value of unpaid care and domestic work, investment returns in care services, job creation

potential in the care economy and how to close gender gaps, which is critical for women’s empowerment and sustainable economic growth. This section also features a methodology developed by UN Women and implemented in Mexico in coordination with the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to estimate the costs and economic impact of investing in care services, emphasizing the importance of evidence-based policymaking and collaborative inter-agency efforts within the UN system in establishing effective care policies.

The third section, *Building Comprehensive Care Systems*, introduces ESCAP’s Model Framework for Action on the Care Economy, designed to provide an action-oriented approach for policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers in designing and effectively implementing care policies. This section also features case studies from the Asia-Pacific region, which has the largest care workforce across all regions², showcasing good practices and demonstrating how countries are aligning with this framework to develop gender-transformative and care-responsive policies.

The brief concludes by underscoring the importance of valuing unpaid care and domestic work and the urgency of investing in the care economy as a cornerstone for achieving global goals.

¹ United Nations, “Pact for the Future”, [A/RES/79/1](#), 7, 23 (New York, 2024)

² International Labour Organization (ILO), *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* (Geneva, 2018).

II: UNPACKING THE CARE ECONOMY

Context

The cascade of global crises, notably the COVID-19 pandemic, the escalating impacts of climate change, the world food crisis, humanitarian challenges and economic downturns, has had a devastating socio-economic impact on people's lives and livelihoods in recent years. Moreover, these crises have disproportionately impacted women and vulnerable populations, setting back our hard-earned advances towards gender equality.

One of the key structural gender inequalities highlighted by these intersecting global crises is the unequal organization and distribution of care. The Secretary-General's report, "Our Common Agenda," recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic has "exacerbated the trillions of dollars that are lost owing to billions of hours of unpaid care work performed every year."³ The pandemic's restrictive measures led to the shutdown of public and commercial care services, pushing care responsibilities from the public and private sectors back into the home. This shift has resulted in a care deficit and a disproportionate increase in women's unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, affecting women's ability to fully participate in the income-generating labour force. Moreover, without the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis being fully addressed, climate change—with its impacts on food security and displacement—further exacerbates the situation, impacting women globally who are primary care providers.

Even before the current compounding crises, the social organization of care was already in crisis. The term "care crisis" refers to the complex challenges of making social security systems financially sustainable, strengthening public health services, and providing

care to dependent persons in a context of growing care needs combined with a reduction in the supply of care.⁴ It arises from a combination of demographic changes—particularly population ageing—coupled with increased urbanization and international migration, evolving social norms and the diversification of household structures, which leaves fewer people in a position to provide care while the number of people in need of care, many of whom are older women, is increasing.

With the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development behind us, it is imperative to prevent further setbacks to our past achievements. Global frameworks and initiatives have increasingly recognized the foundational role of care work in sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies unpaid care work as a key structural barrier to gender equality. Social Development Goal (SDG) 5, to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," includes Target 5.4 to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies. More recently, on 12 October 2023, the Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 54/6 on the centrality of care and support from a human rights perspective.⁵ This was followed by the adoption of Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy (ILC 112/ Resolution V) during the International Labour Conference's 112th Session on 14 June 2024.⁶ In July 2024, the UN System policy paper "Transforming Care Systems in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals and Our Common Agenda" called for coordinated, UN system-wide collaboration to transform the care systems.⁷

³ United Nations, *Our Common Agenda—Report of the Secretary-General*, 34, (United Nations publication, 2021).

⁴ United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Caring in times of COVID-19: A global study on the impact of the pandemic on care work and gender equality* (United Nations Publication, 2023).

⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council, "Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 11 October 2023: Centrality of Care and Support From a Human Rights Perspective," A/HRC/RES/54/6 (New York, 2023).

⁶ ILO, "Resolution Concerning Decent Work and Care in The Economy", ILC 112/ Resolution V (Geneva, 2023).

⁷ United Nations, "Transforming Care Systems in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals and Our Common Agenda", UN System Policy Paper (New York, 2024).

This pivotal moment offers an unparalleled opportunity-to confront the care crisis and foster gender equality by championing care policies that mitigate the social and economic repercussions on women, particularly those from vulnerable groups. This policy brief calls on member States to value unpaid care and domestic work and invest in the care

economy, underlining the necessity for improved data availability, institutional capacities, and inter-sectoral coordination. Such efforts are crucial for establishing effective care systems that prioritize human well-being, propelling us toward a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable future for now and the generations to come.

What is the Care Economy? Recognizing its Gendered Dimensions

The care economy encompasses all forms of care work—**both paid and unpaid**—that are essential for human survival, well-being, and the sustainability of the labour force. **Paid care work** includes all paid employment in the care sectors such as health, education, personal care for dependents, and domestic work. **Unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW)** involves both direct care tasks—such as caring for children, older or sick persons, or persons with disabilities—and indirect care tasks like cooking, cleaning, or gathering fuelwood and water.

There is overwhelming consensus (and data) that show the majority of unpaid care and domestic work is performed by women. In fact, women globally undertake three-quarters of unpaid care work, representing more than 75 per cent of the total hours provided.⁸ Women are also overrepresented in the paid care sector which is often characterized by low wages. According to 2021 statistics, 76.2 per cent of paid domestic workers globally are women.⁹

The unequal distribution of care presents significant barriers to women's economic empowerment. Estimates indicate that across the world, 606 million women, or 41 per cent of those currently not in the workforce, are excluded from the labour market due to unpaid household and care responsibilities, compared to 41 million men.¹⁰ Even when women do enter the

paid labour market, they face additional challenges, including the 'motherhood employment penalty', 'motherhood wage penalty', and 'motherhood leadership challenge',¹¹ where caregiving responsibilities push women into lower-paid or less secure jobs and hinder their career progression. As the gender stereotype of women as primary caregivers persists, these challenges affect not only mothers but all women, irrespective of their motherhood status.

Moreover, care responsibilities often span generations, significantly impacting women throughout their lifecycles. Older women are estimated to provide an average of 4.3 hours of unpaid care and domestic work per day,¹² with many opting for early retirement to care for grandchildren. This early exit from the labour force negatively impacts their pension entitlements, ultimately affecting their long-term financial security and well-being in retirement.

Therefore, valuing unpaid care and domestic work and investing in the care economy is critical for enabling women to realize their full potential and advance gender equality. It is necessary to design public policies that are **gender-transformative** and **care-responsive**, alleviating the care burden of women and families, facilitating their integration into and enhancing the quality of their participation in the labour market.

⁸ ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* (Geneva, 2018).

⁹ ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers: Progress and Prospects Ten Years after the Adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)* (Geneva, 2021).

¹⁰ ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* (Geneva, 2018).

¹¹ ILO, *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All* (Geneva, 2019).

¹² Samuels Fiona and others, "Between Work and Care: Older Women's Economic Empowerment", ODI, research report (London, 2018).

III: THE CASE FOR CARE: INVESTING IN THE CARE ECONOMY

Care is the foundation of social life and the driving force behind the global productive economy—it sustains growth, prosperity, and well-being. This section reframes investment in the care economy—shifting from its perception as merely "social spending" to its recognition as strategic "fiscal redistribution and investment." It explores the economic rationale for public investments in the care economy, highlighting their potential for providing **economic returns**, generating **decent employment**, fostering human capital formation, and **reducing gender disparities**.

The Value of Unpaid Care and Domestic Work

Globally, the care system has relied heavily on unpaid care and domestic work, primarily carried out by women, especially those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. This reliance on families and households to fill care gaps results from a lack of access to quality paid care services and essential public infrastructure. Effectively, this transfers resources from women and girls (and to a lesser extent, men and boys) to the broader economy¹³—yet these essential services remain largely invisible and unaccounted for in traditional macroeconomic metrics like gross domestic product (GDP).

When properly accounted for, the undervalued UCDW yields substantial economic potential. According to International Labour Organization (ILO), globally, unpaid care and domestic work is valued at US\$11 trillion, equivalent to **9 per cent of the global GDP**. Women's unpaid work constitutes approximately 6.6 per cent of GDP, while men's accounts for 2.4 per cent.¹⁴ This global trend is mirrored in regional and national studies. In Asia and the Pacific, estimates

reveal that including unpaid care work in GDP measurements could add US\$3.8 trillion to the regional economy.¹⁵ A report on care work in Australia assessed the monetary value of unpaid care and domestic work to be AUD650.1 billion, equivalent to 50.6 per cent of GDP.¹⁶ In Viet Nam, the contribution of unpaid work was estimated to exceed 20 per cent of GDP in 2015.¹⁷

Investment Returns in Care Services

Beyond the economic potential of UCDW, investments in the paid component of the care economy offer compelling returns. ILO estimated that the health, education and social care sectors constituted 8.7 per cent of global GDP in 2018.¹⁸ **Every dollar** invested in closing the childcare policy gap could result in an average **increase of US\$3.76** in global GDP by 2035.¹⁹

These returns are evident across diverse economies. According to a 2022 World Economic Forum projection, a US\$1.3 trillion investment in social jobs, including those in the paid care sector, in the United States would result in a US\$3.1 trillion GDP return, driven by job creation, increased productivity and a broader economic multiplier effect.²⁰ In the UK, a gender analysis report found that investing in childcare and elder care services would increase GDP by a quarter more than under a business-as-usual scenario by 2030.²¹

In Indonesia, investing 0.5 per cent of GDP in childcare is projected to significantly boost the economy by increasing female labour force participation and improving firm productivity,

¹³ ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* (Geneva, 2018).
¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lola Woetzel and others, "The power of parity: Advancing women's equality in Asia Pacific", McKinsey Global Institute, report (New York, 2018)

¹⁶ APEC Secretariat, "Unpaid Care and Domestic Work: Counting the Costs", report (Singapore, 2022).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* (Geneva, 2018).

¹⁹ ILO, "The Benefits of Investing in Transformative Childcare Policy Packages towards Gender Equality and Social Justice", ILO Brief (Geneva, 2023).

²⁰ World Economic Forum, *Jobs of Tomorrow: The Triple Returns of Social Jobs in the Economic Recovery* (Geneva, 2022).

²¹ Henau, J. and others, "Investing in the Care Economy. A Gender Analysis of Employment Stimulus in Seven OECD Countries", UK Women's Budget Group/International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), report (Brussels, 2016).

potentially adding up to US\$62 billion to GDP.²² Return on investment estimates suggest that every \$1 invested in quality childcare generates \$3 in anticipated income in Nigeria and Indonesia, and \$7 in South Africa and Kenya.²³ This remarkable return on investment highlights the economic viability and potential of care services to contribute positively to national economies.

Job Creation in the Care Economy

The care economy is a critical job creation engine, with the paid care sector constituting 381 million jobs globally, comprising 11.5 per cent of the global employment.²⁴ ILO estimates suggest that investing in a care economy that promotes gender-equal leave, universal childcare, and long-term care services could generate up to 299 million jobs worldwide by 2035, with 234 million (78 per cent) of these jobs for women and 251 million (84 per cent) being formal positions.²⁵ Studies also project that if 2 per cent of GDP were invested in the care industry, the overall employment rate could be raised by between 2.4 per cent and 6.1 per cent across countries, creating approximately 21.72 million jobs across the seven OECD countries.²⁶ In Indonesia, even conservative estimates suggest that such investment could lead to a substantial 6-percentage point increase in labour force participation.²⁷

Compared to other industries, such as construction, which is a common target of fiscal stimulus spending, each dollar spent on the care sector has the potential to generate **2 to 3 times more jobs** due to the substantially higher labour intensity of care work.²⁸ When coupled with targeted investments to improve working conditions, this surge in employment opportunities within the care sector not only addresses unemployment and underemployment issues but also makes care work more attractive, thereby boosting both women's and men's participation in the labour market. This, in turn, promotes gender equality by

providing women with access to formal employment and reducing their risk of poverty. Moreover, job creation in the care sector can stimulate additional economic activity, as increased income leads to higher consumption, indirectly impacting employment and income in other sectors, further boosting economic growth.

Closing Gender Gaps for Economic Growth

Investing in the care economy addresses gender disparity and narrows gender economic gaps. Given the gender composition of care employment, investing in the care economy and expanding care services creates new jobs, particularly in female-dominated occupations and sectors. This not only improves female labour force participation but also alleviates time constraints on women's labour. In OECD countries, simulations show that investing 2 per cent of GDP in the care economy creates nearly as many jobs for men as in construction industries, but up to **four times as many jobs for women**²⁹, significantly decreasing the gender employment gap. In the long term, targeted investment in care also increases wages and improves working conditions in the industry, enhances training and professionalization, and strengthens the social security system. These improvements not only benefit women employees in the industry but also alleviate the unpaid care and domestic work burden faced by the broader female population. More importantly, addressing gender disparities by investing in the care economy can unlock significant economic growth. The potential gains from bridging gender gaps in caregiving and other areas are estimated to range from \$12 trillion to \$28 trillion in global GDP.³⁰ This underscores the critical role of gender equality in enhancing productivity and consumption, which are key drivers of economic prosperity.

²² World Bank, "Economic Gains from Investing in Childcare: The Case of Indonesia", report (Jakarta, 2022).

²³ World Bank, "Addressing Care to Accelerate Equality (English)", (Washington, D.C., 2023).

²⁴ ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* (Geneva, 2018)

²⁵ ILO, *Care at Work: Investing in Care Leave and Services for a More Gender Equal World of Work* (Geneva, 2022).

²⁶ Henau, J. and others, "Investing in the Care Economy. A Gender Analysis of Employment Stimulus in Seven OECD Countries", UK Women's Budget Group/ International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), report (Brussels, 2016).

²⁷ Fraym, "Indonesia Caregiving Return on Investment: Complete Report", report (Arlington, 2022).

²⁸ Henau, J. and others, "Investing in the Care Economy. A Gender Analysis of Employment Stimulus in Seven OECD Countries", UK Women's Budget Group/ International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), report (Brussels, 2016).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ World Bank, "Addressing Care to Accelerate Equality (English)", (Washington, D.C., 2023).

Box 1. Methodology to Estimate the Costs and Economic Impacts of Implementing Care Services

The UN Women Regional Office for the Americas and the Caribbean and the UN Women Office in Mexico have developed a methodology to analyse and estimate the costs and returns on investment in care services for children, older persons, and care-dependent individuals with disabilities. This methodology allows for constructing various investment scenarios based on different parameters of coverage, progressivity, and quality of care services, while also assessing the effects on GDP, employment, and tax revenues.

The methodology involves several steps: 1)defining the target population, 2)estimating the potential demand for care, 3)determining progressivity in meeting this demand, 4)defining the care service supply, 5)estimating the costs of each care service, 6)calculating the total costs required to achieve universal coverage of the potential demand, 7)simulating various prospective scenarios, and 8)developing a simulation model for job demand-supply adjustments specifically for women. This approach enables the establishment of service costs for the target populations and projects the positive economic impacts of investing in care services, framing such investments as smart fiscal measures.

Using this methodology, under the leadership of the National Institute for Women (INMUJERES) of Mexico and in coordination with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), a case study was conducted in Mexico to estimate the impact of implementing a universal, free, and quality childcare system for children under six years old. The findings revealed that such an investment would require an annual expenditure equivalent to 1.16 per cent of the 2019 GDP. In return, it is projected to increase the gross value of production by 1.77 per cent and boost employment by 3.9 per cent annually. Moreover, it could generate an increase in tax revenue amounting to 0.29 per cent of the 2019 GDP each year, while simultaneously narrowing gender gaps in the labour market and enhancing long-term income prospects for children. This case study demonstrates that investing in a universal childcare system is not only economically feasible but also represents a **smart tax measure**, showcasing both substantial economic returns and significant social benefits.

UN Women, Methodology to Estimate the Costs and Economic Impacts of Implementing Care Services in Latin America and the Caribbean (Mexico City, 2022).

UN Women and others, Costs, Returns, and Effects of a Universal, Free, and Quality Child Care System in Mexico (Mexico City, 2021).

IV: BUILDING COMPREHENSIVE CARE SYSTEMS

The UN forecasts a significant rise in long-term care needs, with the proportion of older persons (aged 60 and above) in the global population projected to increase from 13.4 per cent in 2020 to 21.8 per cent by 2050, and further to 29.7 per cent by 2100.³¹ This ageing population trend means that by 2030, approximately 2.3 billion people will require care.³² In anticipation of this growing demand and in response to the current care crisis, many countries and regions are actively working to build comprehensive care systems. **Comprehensive care systems** refer to a set of policies aimed at implementing a new social organization of care with the purpose of caring for, assisting and supporting people who require it, as well as recognizing, reducing and redistributing care work.³³ They take a human rights and intersectional approach by acknowledging and targeting the multiple socio-economic identities of individuals and families over the life course.

Despite these efforts, current research on policy responses demonstrates a remaining gap—only 28 per cent of the policy measures adopted across Asia and the Pacific could be identified as care sensitive, lacking the momentum for large-scale transformation.³⁴ This section builds on ESCAP's innovative **Model Framework for Action** which provides a holistic approach to policy measures, highlights effective, innovative practices and case studies, shedding a light on the journey towards establishing such ecosystems. These examples underscore the critical importance of adopting tailored, cross-sectoral strategies that consider the unique demographic contexts and fiscal realities of countries and regions, not only to enhance care provision but also to promote gender equality and stimulate economic growth.



Children at play © United Nations Bhutan

³¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, "World Population Prospects 2024." Available at <https://population.un.org/wpp/> (accessed on 23 July 2024).

³² ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* (Geneva, 2018).

³³ ECLAC and UN Women, *Financing Care Systems and Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean: Contributions for a Sustainable Recovery with Gender Equality* (LC/TS.2022/134) (United Nations publication, 2022).

³⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), "COVID-19 and the Unpaid Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific", Report (Bangkok, 2021)

Model Framework for Action on Care Economy

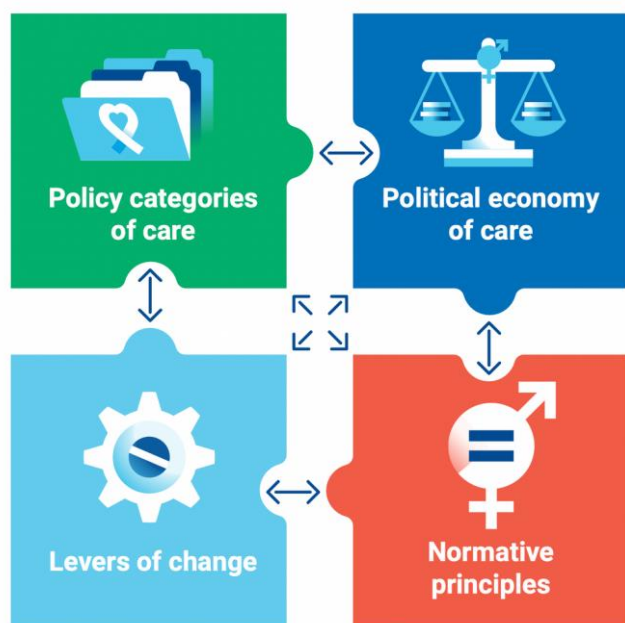


Figure 1 ESCAP's Model Framework for Action (MFA)

ESCAP's Model Framework for Action (MFA)³⁵ is designed to support policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers working on the care economy. It offers an action-oriented framework for creating effective and comprehensive care systems. The MFA spans the breadth of macro, meso, and micro contexts within which care occurs, taking into consideration the social, economic, political, and normative aspects of policymaking. It also accounts for care needs across the life course and generations, with the goal of fostering a well-functioning care economy.

The core of this MFA model is protecting the **Right to Give and Receive Care**, articulated through four key elements: Normative principles; Political categories of care; Political economy of care and Levers of change (Figure 1).

(a) Normative Principles

The MFA adopts a fine-grained set of seven normative principles as the ethical criteria to guide all care economy policies for ESCAP member States. It emphasizes the need to explicitly acknowledge underlying normative principles for the care agenda as a whole, as well as to set normative standards within specific policy categories. The right to give and receive care sits at the centre of this normative stance. Figure 2 illustrates the seven principles that need to be ensured in order to deliver policies that value the care economy, create gender transformative social change, and promote sustainable economic growth.



Figure 2 Seven normative principles of the MFA

³⁵ ESCAP, *Model Framework for Policy Action on the Care Economy: Concept Paper* (United Nations Publication, 2024).

(b) Policy Categories of Care

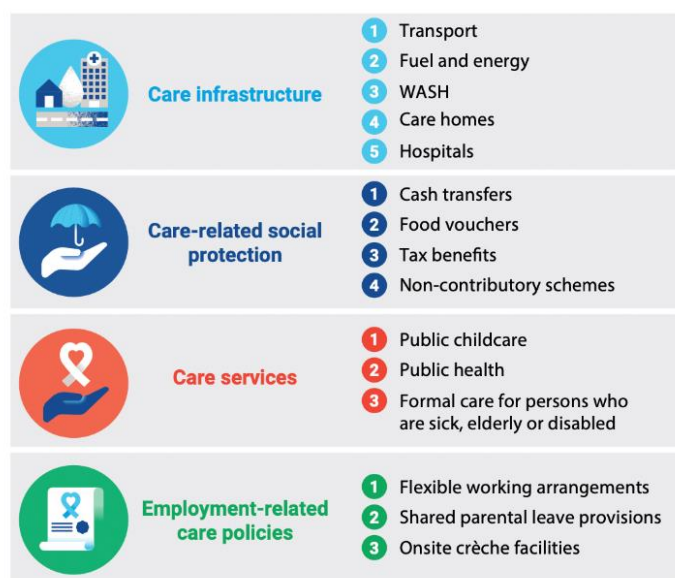


Figure 3 Policy Categories of Care

Four key policy categories of care have been identified as the MFA adopts a comprehensive approach to addressing the diverse needs and differentiated terrain of care. These categories encompass a variety of sub-policies that reflect specific sectoral and issue-based concerns. Adopting specific policy measures within these categories can significantly impact the lives and care responsibilities of women:

Care infrastructure — access to water; sanitation; safe transport; cooking fuels; food procurement; utilities and housing; time- and energy-saving devices, technologies and domestic appliances and physical infrastructure for social care provision such as schools, hospitals, nursing and care homes, and health clinics.

Care-related social protection — social assistance in the form of unconditional cash transfers, cash-for-care, vouchers, tax benefits, or universal basic income; social welfare schemes such as public works programmes, subsidies, vouchers, and school meals for children of income-poor households; social

insurance programmes including universal health coverage, pension systems, and disability or sickness allowances.

Care services — childcare; long-term care; care for older persons; care for multiple vulnerable groups; reproductive and health care services; paid domestic work and care entrepreneurship.

Employment-related care policies — maternity, paternity, and parental leave policies; leave to care policies; flexible working policies; childcare facilities; paid sickness and health care policies; recognition and formalization of migrant and informal sector workers; decent working conditions for paid care workers; other policies such as career breaks, sabbaticals, severance pay, and employer-funded or contributory social protection schemes.

A basket of policies across different categories serves as a pathway to the development of comprehensive care systems. Within the basket, governments and policymakers should select and prioritize key policy areas based on local, regional, and national priorities. It is crucial to consider the **interconnections** between these policy areas to ensure comprehensive care needs are effectively addressed. For instance, while childcare may be a priority in countries with young and growing populations, addressing childcare alone will not fully alleviate women's time poverty or care responsibilities. Attention must also be given to other care needs, such as piped water, sanitation, cooking fuel, and healthcare for sick, or older persons.

It is also important to acknowledge that none of these policies areas stand in isolation. Several overlap, coincide, and require a **multi-sectoral** and **whole-of-government** response.

Box 2. Examples of Care Infrastructure, Care-related Social Protection, Care Services, and Employment-related Care Policies

Care Infrastructure in Cambodia

In line with the National Strategic Development Plan and Cambodia's Sustainable Development Goals, the Ministry of Rural Development in Cambodia has significantly improved rural road infrastructure at multiple levels, enhancing access to health centres, schools, markets, and employment opportunities for women. These infrastructure upgrades have contributed to poverty reduction and increased access to essential services, such as improved water supply and sanitation. Additionally, the switch to biogas has reduced the burden of domestic chores for rural women, freeing up time for income-generating and community activities.

Cambodia, Ministry of Women's Affairs, National Report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Phnom Penh, 2024). Available at <https://www.asiapacificgender.org/node/244> cited in ESCAP, "Valuing and investing in unpaid care and domestic work. Country case study: Cambodia", report (Bangkok, 2022).



Women learning how to sew © ILO Pakistan/Flickr

Care-related Social Protection in Pakistan

In March 2021, the Government of Punjab launched a pilot project to extend social security coverage to domestic workers, requiring contributions from both employers and workers to secure benefits like health coverage and pensions. This initiative aims to provide full coverage for domestic workers and serves as a model for extending benefits to other informal economy workers. These efforts not only offer critical safety nets for vulnerable workers but also promote greater compliance and social responsibility among businesses, setting a strong example for protecting workers across the informal economy.

ILO, A Social Protection Profile of Pakistan: Building an Inclusive Social Protection System (Islamabad, 2021).

Care Services in India

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), now representing 3 million women workers in the informal economy across 19 states in India, established the Sangini Child Care Workers' Cooperative in 1986 to address the need for affordable childcare. The cooperative now operates 25 centres in Ahmedabad, providing care, basic education, nutrition, and health services to 500 children aged 0-6, enabling 85 per cent of working mothers to extend their own working hours by 2 to 4 hours. Additionally, SEWA care workers offer care for older relatives.

ILO, Decent Work and the Care Economy (Geneva, 2024).



Women community leaders © UNDP/Climate

Employment-related Care Policies in China

In 2022–2023, the China Enterprise Confederation introduced workplace policies focused on flexible working hours, enhanced breastfeeding support, childcare, and protections for pregnant workers and new mothers. To facilitate the adoption of these policies, training programmes were conducted for 200 enterprises, reaching 2,000 participants, while one-on-one technical guidance was provided to five pilot enterprises, all of which successfully implemented the new measures. Additionally, two enterprises went further by strengthening their collective agreements to better balance family responsibilities, highlighting the broader impact of these employment-related care policies.

ILO, Decent Work and the Care Economy (Geneva, 2024)

(c) Political Economy of Care



Figure 4 Political Economy of Care

The political economy of care perspective emphasizes the importance of a) understanding the gendered factors within a country's political economy; b) connecting these factors to care issues; and c) fostering an enabling political environment that supports gender transformation and care responsiveness. This approach highlights the gendered dimensions of the actors, interests, institutional contexts, ideas, and power dynamics shaping our economies and societies. It also focuses on the attitudes and ideologies of these entities regarding the care economy, thereby asserting that care policies are essential for the wellbeing of all society members.

To conduct political economy analysis, policymakers need to map **relevant actors and key stakeholders** (including political leaders, civil servants, political

parties, business associations, trade unions, civil society organizations, and external actors like foreign aid agencies, regional organizations, donors and multinational corporations), identify their driving interests and incentives, list down **formal and informal institutions** operating in the form of **formal or informal social norms**, practices and codified laws and rules, and lastly, understand the ideas and discourses that shape public and political views.

It is important to engage in this political economy analysis at multiple levels – the national macro political economy analysis, a sectoral level political economy analysis or a policy and issue area specific political economy analysis. At all levels the attention to care relevant actors, ideas, institutions along intersectional lines need to be undertaken.

Box 3. Political Economy of Care and Levers of Change Analysis During Lao PDR National Consultation³⁶

In June 2024, the Lao PDR National Consultation on Valuing and Investing in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work was jointly convened by the Lao Women's Union, ESCAP and Oxfam in Laos. During the consultation, participants from key line ministries, international organizations, and CSOs were divided into four groups based on the four policy categories of care: care infrastructure, care-related social protection, care services, and employment-related care policies.

Within these small groups, participants addressed questions related to the political economy of care and levers of change. On the first day, participants identified several policy entry points using a **political economy of care** analysis. They evaluated relevant actors and interests, policies and institutional mechanisms, as well as social norms and practices within their respective policy categories of care.



Participants at the Lao PDR national consultation © Dola Mongkhounkham

On the second day, participants assessed the viability and priorities of their identified policy entry points by evaluating the **levers of change** in their specific policy areas. The policy entry points identified at the end of the consultation include:

- **Care Infrastructure:** Implement strategic enhancements to the 2021 Regulation on Facilities Serving Older People, Persons with Disabilities, and Women.
- **Care-related Social Protection:** Expand the 2020 National Social Protection Strategy to increase social protection coverage, particularly for female informal workers.
- **Care Services:** Develop a childcare pilot project in collaboration with UNFPA, building on UNFPA's existing pilot initiatives in childcare facilities.
- **Employment-related Care Policies:** Strengthen coordination efforts between the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Lao Women's Union, and the Lao Federation of Trade Unions for employment management, specifically enhancing provisions under the Social Security Law.

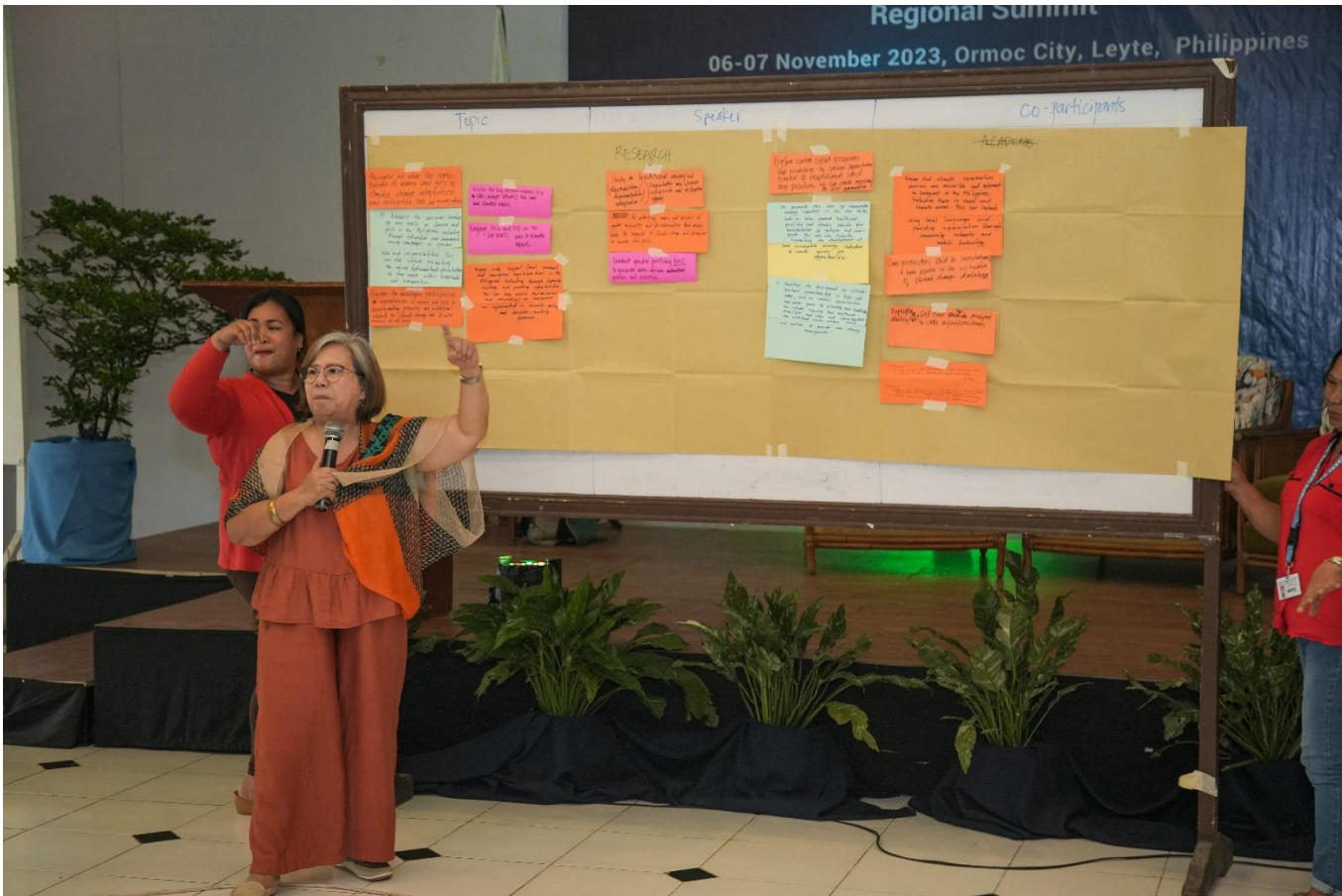
³⁶ For more details, visit <https://www.unescap.org/events/2024/lao-pdr-national-consultation-valuing-and-investing-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work>

(d) Levers of Change



Figure 5 Levers of change

The selection, design, and composition of a basket of care policies can be determined by priorities of care within each policy area – these priorities can be identified through data on needs assessment, resource allocation, regulatory frameworks, international commitments, inter-institutional mechanisms, and adequate representation of transformative voices in favour of norm change. These are termed ‘levers or drivers of change’ and are elaborated in Figure 5.



Participants present the outcomes of their discussions at the Philippines Subnational Consultation on Care in Ormoc, October 2023 @ Sam Rigby Jr./Oxfam Pilipinas

Box 4. A Whole-of-Government Approach in the Philippines and Gender Budgeting in New Zealand

A Whole-of-Government Approach in the Philippines

The Philippines has adopted a whole-of-government approach to the care economy, leading to significant advancements in national action plans and legislation. In September 2023, the Philippine National Consultation on Valuing and Investing in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work, organized by the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW), ESCAP, and Oxfam Pilipinas, brought together stakeholders from both governmental and non-governmental entities.⁴² The consultation aimed to evaluate current conditions and propose interventions to value the care economy and promote women's economic empowerment, with the resulting recommendations shaping a national action plan on care, set to launch in late 2024.

In November 2023, the Philippines took a significant step forward by enacting Republic Act No. 11965, "An Act Institutionalizing Policies for the Protection and Welfare of Caregivers in the Practice of their Occupation." This law mandates protections for caregivers, including bi-weekly payments, overtime pay, and the right to terminate contracts in cases of abuse, marking a milestone in caregiver protection. At the local level, a subnational consultation in Ormoc City emphasized the importance of data in care, the care-climate nexus, and local policies to address unpaid care work. This consultation led to a provincial care ordinance, now serving as a model for other regions. These initiatives highlight the Philippines' comprehensive efforts to improve conditions for caregivers and underscore the critical role of care work in the economy.

Gender Budgeting and Financing in New Zealand

In 2019, New Zealand introduced the world's first Wellbeing Budget, setting a global precedent by prioritizing budget allocations to five key areas: mental health, child well-being, supporting the aspirations of the Māori and Pasifika populations, building a productive nation, and transforming the economy. Central to this Wellbeing Budget is the holistic consideration of all aspects of a good life, encompassing not only access to healthcare and education but also fostering a strong sense of community connection.

United Nations, "Transforming Care Systems in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals and Our Common Agenda", UN System Policy Paper (New York, 2024)

Conclusion

This policy brief underscores the critical importance of valuing unpaid care and domestic work and investing in the care economy as a cornerstone of sustainable and inclusive development, economic resilience, and gender equality. It provides a clear roadmap for building comprehensive care systems that effectively address the current care crisis.

Care is a cross-cutting issue across several SDGs. Although women are disproportionately impacted by care work, it is not an issue confined to women's interests alone. Decades of scholarship have demonstrated that care is an issue of concern for women, men, children, older persons, sick persons, persons with disabilities, and governments alike. Often, care needs overlap across these groups.

Recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work, and promoting shared responsibility, are crucial steps for transforming gender relations and, in effect, transforming the world. Our advocacy for valuing and investing in a care society calls upon all member States to embrace a whole-of-government, whole-of-society, and multi-sectoral and integrated approach. This involves forging partnerships across public and private sectors, engaging in regional collaborations, and enhancing the collection of gender-disaggregated and time-use data on care. Coordinated efforts are emphasized not only by ESCAP's Model Framework for Action but also by the Declaration on Future Generations as essential for policies "that safeguard the needs and interests of future generations".³⁷

The case studies from Cambodia, China, India, and Pakistan highlight the need to enhance institutional capacities for implementing care-sensitive policies. Similarly, national consultations in Lao PDR and the Philippines demonstrate how a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, combined with inter-sectoral coordination, can drive significant advancements in policy and practice. The methodology developed in Mexico for estimating the costs and returns of care services further underscores the importance of empirical data availability and evidence-based policymaking in building effective care systems, aligning with the Declaration on Future Generations for achieving commitments for the future.³⁸

In the context of the Summit of the Future, investing in the care economy is essential for promoting sustainable, inclusive, equitable, and compassionate systems that benefit both present and future generations. Care spans generations and care systems should be developed that address needs across the life course. Investing in the care economy also provides an opportunity to strengthen intergenerational relations and build societies of all ages. It is our collective responsibility to address today's challenges, such as demographic changes and economic inequalities, by advancing comprehensive care systems as the fourth pillar of welfare alongside education, health, and social security. Let us commit to bold, transformative actions that recognize the value of care work and create a sustainable and inclusive future for all.

³⁷ United Nations, "Pact for the Future", [A/RES/79/1](#), 56 (New York, 2024)

³⁸ United Nations., <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/soff-declaration-on-future-generations-rev3.pdf>, accessed on 27 August 2024.

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