

Module 2 Transcript : Care Systems in Focus: The Case of Timor-Leste

Slide 1: Building Inclusive and Resilient Care Systems: Induction Modules for Policymakers in Timor-Leste

Welcome to Module 2 in which we will go over the landscape of care systems in Timor-Leste to set the stage for the applying the policy tools to the the context of the country.

Slide 2: What's Ahead: Your Four-Module Induction Guide

In the previous module, we introduced the foundations of care work and its significance for inclusive development. In this session, we shift our focus more specifically to Timor-Leste—the realities of unpaid care and domestic work and exploring its care policy landscape. The aim is to give you a clearer picture of where Timor-Leste stands today—and to help identify priority areas for dialogue and action.

Slide 3: Learning Objectives for this Module: Setting the Stage for the National Consultation

In this module, we'll focus on three main objectives.

- Understand key care-related features of Timor-Leste's policy landscape
- Build a shared understanding of who provides, supports, and is impacted by care work in Timor-Leste
- Prepare to identify policy gaps in each care category

Slide 4: Timor-Leste's Care Landscape: Gender Inequality and Care in Timor-Leste1

Let's take a closer look at how women's time is spent in Timor-Leste. On average, women in spend 57 hours a week on unpaid care and domestic tasks—things like cooking, cleaning, and looking after children, older persons, and others with care needs. By contrast, men spend about 17 hours on these same tasks. That's a difference of 40 hours a week—the equivalent of a full-time job. Women also care for more individuals on a daily basis—5.8 people on average, compared to 3.4 for men. As a result, women experience what we call “time poverty.” They have just 80 hours of non-work time per week—compared to 107 hours for men. That's 27 fewer hours of rest and recovery for women every single week. This imbalance affects more than personal wellbeing. It shapes the whole economy—and holds back national progress.

Slide 5: Timor-Leste's Care Landscape: Women's Labor Force Participation

These care responsibilities directly impact women's ability to enter and remain in the labour force. In 2021, only 24.2% of women were actively participating in the labour

market—compared to 37% of men. The gap becomes even more pronounced between ages 25 and 49—years typically associated with raising children and caring for family members. In this age group, the participation gap between women and men is nearly 25.

Slide 6: Timor-Leste's Care Landscape: Women's Labor Force Participation

When asked why they are not in the workforce, 66% of women cited family or personal responsibilities. Among men, this figure was lower- 56.7%.

This makes it clear: unpaid care is not just a domestic matter- it is a central barrier to women's economic participation.

Even when women are employed, they are more likely to be in informal or self-employed roles, and earn on average 6.6% less than men.

Without adequate care policies and support systems, women will continue to face structural barriers to equal participation in the economy.

Slide 7: Timor-Leste's Care Landscape: Care work and agriculture-based livelihoods

Beyond care, many women in Timor-Leste are engaged in subsistence production—work that's often unpaid, informal, and unrecognized in official statistics.

Approximately 77% of the workforce is informally employed, meaning no contracts, benefits, or legal protections.

Among those engaged in subsistence production, over 357,000 are women, compared to about 243,000 men.

For women aged 25 to 64, —91.5% are engaged in subsistence production work, often farming for household use rather than for sale or income.

The boundaries between different types of labor are blurry—many women do unpaid care, subsistence farming, and small-scale income-generating activities—all in the same day.

Yet, most labor laws and benefits only apply to formal workers. This many women fall outside the reach of employment protections, parental leave, or social safety nets.

Recognizing, reducing, and redistributing care and subsistence work is critical—not only for fairness, but also for building an inclusive and resilient economy in Timor-Leste.

Slide 9: Timor-Leste's Care Landscape: Laws and Policies

The Strategic Development Plan (2011–2030) highlights gender equality and rural women's empowerment as national priorities.

The Maubisse Declaration (2023–2028) has brought together 17 government institutions to focus on women's economic inclusion

Other efforts include National Action Plans on Gender-Based Violence and UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

And the draft Domestic Workers Law that will extend provide important protections to paid care workers

Slide 10: Timor-Leste Policy Ecosystem

To understand how care policy is developed and implemented in Timor-Leste, it's important to map out the broader policy ecosystem.

This ecosystem includes a wide range of actors—from government ministries and UN agencies to civil society, academia, and development partners.

Importantly, Timor-Leste has recently launched a Working Group on Care which aims to guide strategic direction on care policy in the country.

This rich ecosystem is a strength and provides a rich landscape to explore policy entry points

Effective care policy in Timor-Leste depends on leveraging this ecosystem for joint planning, data sharing, and inclusive implementation.

Slide 11: Timor-Leste's Care Landscape: Social Norms

In addition to policies and services, social norms play a critical role in shaping who provides care and how it is valued.

Traditional gender norms in Timor-Leste, as in many other countries, often still position men as breadwinners and women as caregivers—even when women are employed outside the home.

These expectations mean women often face a “double burden”—working both inside and outside the household.

Cultural beliefs reinforce the idea that caregiving is a moral responsibility or an act of love—something that shouldn't require support, compensation, or public investment.

At the same time, men's contributions to care are often praised as exceptional, rather than normalized.

Without deliberate efforts to challenge these norms, policies alone will not be enough to shift the balance.

Slide 12: Care Infrastructure in Timor-Leste

Let's start with the examining the care landscape across key policy categories of care.

First lets look at care infrastructure.

These are the basic services like water, electricity, transport, and clean cooking that determine how much time and effort care tasks require.

There have been notable improvements in access to water, electricity, and sanitation in recent years—but rural-urban disparities persist.

Clean cooking initiatives, including improved stoves, have been introduced and Around 73% of households have access to electricity, however for many rural households, it remains costly and unreliable.

Public transport is often, expensive, and can be inaccessible—especially for women with caregiving responsibilities or those living in remote areas.

Strengthening care infrastructure—particularly in rural areas—is a foundational step to reducing women’s care responsibilities and improving access to education, health, and income-generating opportunities.

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Slide 13: Care-Related Social Protection in Timor-Leste

Social protection is another pillar of the care economy—helping families cope with financial burdens related to caregiving. The National Strategy for Social Protection (2021–2030) lays out a strong vision to reduce poverty and expand support for care responsibilities.

Key programs include:

Bolsa da Mãe, a longstanding conditional cash transfer for vulnerable mothers.

Bolsa da Mãe – Jersaun Foun, a newer universal child grant that extends benefits to pregnant women and caregivers of young children.

A national school feeding programme supports around 290,000 children, easing the care load on families.

Social pensions reach nearly all older persons—but people with disabilities and rural communities sometimes still face access barriers.

Finally, high informal employment (about 77% of the workforce) limits access to contributory schemes like maternity or parental leave.

While the policy framework is strong, the coverage and accessibility of these programs remain uneven, especially for informal workers and rural families.

Slide 14: Care Services in Timor-Leste

Care services—such as childcare, elder care, care for persons with disabilities, and protections for paid care workers—are a vital part of the care system. In Timor-Leste, these services are developing, with promising initiatives and growing policy interest.

Childcare access is expanding, particularly through community-based preschools in rural areas supported by partners like UNICEF and ChildFund. A recent government daycare pilot in Dili marks a positive step toward more formal childcare provision. However services are sometimes inaccessible and unaffordable to many parents requiring care.

When it comes to Elder care, it is largely family-based, with many older persons supported by relatives. Health services are available, though not always tailored to older adults' needs. Planning for long-term care is becoming increasingly important as the population ages.

Care for persons with disabilities is guided by national policies and international commitments, including the CRPD. Most care remains home-based, highlighting the need to strengthen services and better support informal caregivers.

Domestic workers, who are mostly women, play a crucial role in household care. A draft law is under discussion to formalize protections—an important step in recognizing this essential workforce.

Timor-Leste has laid important groundwork. With continued investment, coordination, and policy development, care services can become more accessible, equitable, and supportive of both caregivers and those receiving care.

Slide 15: Employment-Related Care Policies in Timor-Leste

Finally, let's look at how labor policies support working caregivers.

The Labour Code includes some important protections:

12 weeks of paid maternity leave.

5 days of paid paternity leave.

Breastfeeding breaks, medical leave, and workplace protections during pregnancy.

However, there's no legal right to flexible work, nor is there support for employer-provided childcare.

The biggest gap is for informal workers, who make up about 77% of the workforce. They are excluded from most employment benefits, including leave and social security.

The current policies also can often unintentionally reinforce traditional gender roles:

Maternity leave is longer than paternity leave.

There are no provisions for shared or extended parental leave, which could encourage men to take on more caregiving.

For employment policies to be truly equitable, they must be expanded to informal workers and designed to redistribute care responsibilities more fairly between men and women.

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Slide 16: Potential levers to advance care in Timor-Leste

Unpaid care and domestic work sustain every aspect of society and the economy—but this work remains undervalued and unequally shared.

The ESCAP framework identifies seven “levers of change” that Timor-Leste can use to advance a care agenda.

Let’s walk through four core areas of action: social norms, financing, data, and leadership.

1. Recognize, Reduce & Redistribute Unpaid Care Work:

Deep-rooted social norms assign care work to women and girls.

National campaigns, school-based education, and community dialogues can help normalize shared care responsibilities.

2. Strengthen Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB):

GRB helps governments target funding where it’s most needed—like rural water, childcare centers, or caregiver support with a gender lens.

This means training officials, improving coordination, and embedding accountability.

Local financing is especially important to reach underserved areas.

3. Improve Care- and Gender-Disaggregated Data:

There is no recent time-use survey in Timor-Leste—so unpaid care remains largely invisible in the data.

Without concrete data, it’s hard to make informed policy decisions or measure progress.

Disaggregated data is also essential to address intersectional gaps—for example, among women with disabilities or older persons

4. Support Women’s Leadership in Local Decision-Making:

Women are underrepresented in local governance, despite playing a major role in caregiving.

Local leadership is where priorities for water, childcare, and health services get set—so women’s participation is crucial.

Building leadership skills and shifting local norms are both key.

Recognizing, reducing, and redistributing care work will take political will, sustained investment, and collaboration.

But the reward is a more inclusive, resilient, and gender-equitable Timor-Leste

Slide 16: Care to Recap?

This module covered a lot of ground—so before we wrap up, why not try out a few questions to test what you’ve absorbed?

Scan the QR code on screen to take the quick quiz for this module.