

WIMUN NEW  
YORK 2026



# STUDY GUIDE

International Labor Organization  
Decent work and the care economy

## Introduction

### Overview of the care economy

- Societies and economies depend upon unpaid and paid care work to function, and to sustain human, social and economic development.** Human beings depend on care, as recipients and as providers. Care activities and relations involve meeting the physical, psychological and emotional needs of adults and children, whether or not they have disabilities or are ill, and include self-care. Care comes in many forms, including childcare, long-term care, support services, education and healthcare.
- Care workers are essential to the provision of care. The care economy constitutes 381 million jobs globally – about 11.5 per cent of total employment.** Unpaid care work is mostly provided within households or families and contributes an estimated US\$11 trillion to the global economy each year.
- How care needs are met and how care is distributed and rewarded matters for gender equality.** More than three quarters of unpaid care work worldwide is performed by women. Globally, women spend on average 4 hours and 25 minutes each day on unpaid care work, compared with an average of 1 hour and 23 minutes for men. 3 An estimated 606 million working-age women are outside the workforce due to caring responsibilities and social reproduction. 4 The non-availability of, or reduced access to, paid care services has a significant impact on women's access to decent work and productive employment, as it compromises their opportunities to engage on an equal basis in paid work or income-generating activities, and in socio-political life. At the same time, two thirds of the paid care workforce are women. Increasing access to care services and improving working conditions in the care sector could help boost women's and men's participation in the labour market and access to decent work, which would, in turn, improve their socio-economic opportunities and overall well-being. This would contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Goal 5 on gender equality, Goal 8 on full and productive employment for all, and Goal 10 on reducing inequalities.
- The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic and social crises have emphasized the importance of the care economy, while exposing its weaknesses,** including the poor working conditions of care workers and staff shortages. The pandemic intensified the amount of unpaid care work performed, particularly by women and girls. In this context, rising demands for care are likely to deepen unequal distributions of work between mothers and fathers and increase unmet needs for care, thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty and social exclusion. 5 Globally, care workforce shortages persist and many care workers face decent work deficits, which can also impact the overall quality of the care provided.

ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 2018, 6 ff.

ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 49. ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 53. ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 83. ILO, *Care at Work: Investing in Care Leave and Services for a More Gender Equal World of Work*, 2022, 40. ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 12.

#### 2 Interesting Facts

The scale of the care economy makes it one of the largest employment sectors in the world. This statistic positions care work as not only essential to human welfare but also as a cornerstone of global economic systems, this is often overlooked in macroeconomic planning and labour policy prioritization.

#### 2 Interesting Facts

Despite its invisibility in traditional GDP measures, unpaid care work injects trillions into global economies annually more than the combined GDP of several G20 nations. This makes its exclusion from formal economic recognition a critical gap in policy and planning.

#### 3 Interesting Facts

Time use data shows that the unequal distribution of unpaid care work limits women's access to education, employment and leadership. This structural imbalance reproduces inequality across cultures and income levels and calls for comprehensive and sustained policy action.

#### 3 Did you know that...?

The exclusion of 606 million working age women from the labour force due to unpaid care responsibilities represents a significant global loss in productivity. Closing this gap could unlock economic potential comparable to that of entire regions.

#### 3 Something to think about

If two thirds of the paid care workforce are women, what would it take for care work to be recognized as a pathway to empowerment rather than a low status occupation? How can policies transform this highly feminized sector into one that promotes professional growth, fair compensation and social value?

#### 3 Definition

Decent work refers to employment that provides fair income, social protection, respect for rights and dignity in the workplace. In the care sector it serves as a vital standard for improving job quality and addressing inequality.

#### 4 Interesting Facts

The intensification of unpaid care work during the pandemic had far-reaching effects on women and girls, who shouldered an even greater share of responsibilities at home. This surge in workload deepened existing inequalities, disrupted career paths and reinforced traditional gender roles in both private and public spheres.

5. **Investing in the care economy** can build robust and inclusive care infrastructure and services that are more resilient to external shocks such as pandemics, natural disasters and conflict, as well as economic downturns. Such investment can: enhance the skills of care workers and provide decent employment opportunities and better working conditions for what is currently a substantially feminized paid care workforce; lead to the recruitment of more men into the care workforce to tackle occupational segregation; address the unequal distribution of unpaid care work; and promote work-life balance for workers with family responsibilities. This, in turn, can promote the human rights, well-being and agency of those who provide care as well as those who receive care; the right to organize and fully functioning social dialogue mechanisms are also crucial for care workers. Investing in the care economy can reduce the inequalities associated with it by increasing the societal value, appreciation and prioritization of care activities, care service providers and the people who undertake paid and unpaid care work.<sup>7</sup>

## Care work in the ILO and within the United Nations system

6. **The ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, 2019, recognizes the importance of investment in the care economy as a means of achieving gender equality at work.** 8 Building on the Centenary Declaration and stressing social dialogue as an essential tool, the Global Call to Action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 109th Session (2021), places investment in the care economy within the context of a job-rich recovery with decent work and inclusive economic growth.<sup>9</sup> At the same session, the Conference called for gender-responsive social protection policies and investments in the care economy, including through providing care credits in social insurance; fostering income security during maternity, paternity and parental leave; and facilitating access to affordable and quality childcare and long-term care services as an integral part of social protection systems.<sup>10</sup> At its 110th Session (2022), the Conference called for **pro-employment macroeconomic and sectoral policies** to facilitate the creation of decent jobs in the care economy.<sup>11</sup> The Programme and Budget for 2020–21, 2022–23 and 2024–25 include a focus on supporting investments in the care economy, ensuring decent work for care workers, and work-life balance. As a follow-up to the resolution concerning inequalities and the world of work, adopted by the Conference at its 109th Session (2021), the comprehensive and integrated ILO strategy to reduce and prevent inequalities in the world of work identifies combined policy responses that address the unequal distribution of unpaid care work between men and women as a requirement for the achievement of gender equality and non-discrimination, and considers improvements in the quality of public services and social protection to be essential to enable combining of paid work and family care.<sup>12</sup> The conclusions concerning the second recurrent discussion on labour protection, adopted by the Conference at its 111th Session (2023), state that the Organization should strengthen its support to governments and employers' and workers' organizations by 'elaborating a strategy ...that ensures equality of treatment and opportunity for

<sup>7</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, Ch. 6.

<sup>8</sup> ILO, *ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work*, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> ILO, *Global Call to Action for a Human-Centred Recovery from the COVID-19 Crisis that Is Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient*, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> ILO, *Resolution and conclusions concerning the second recurrent discussion on social protection (social security)*, ILC.109/Resolution III (2021), point 13(f) and (g).

<sup>11</sup> ILO, *Resolution and conclusions concerning the third recurrent discussion on employment*, ILC.110/Resolution IV (2022), point 11(b).

<sup>12</sup> ILO, *Follow-up to the resolution concerning inequalities and the world of work (2021): Comprehensive and integrated ILO strategy to reduce and prevent inequalities in the world of work*, GB.346/INS/5, 2022.

### 6 Interesting Facts

Recognizing investment in the care economy as a tool for gender equality reframes care from a domestic burden into a shared social responsibility. Positioning it as essential public infrastructure signals a shift toward structural solutions that support equity, economic resilience and inclusive

### 6 Definition

Pro-employment macroeconomic and sectoral policies are strategies designed to boost job creation in key social sectors such as care, health and education. They aim to promote inclusive growth while advancing equity through targeted public investment.

all women, particularly for those of intersectional identities, a balanced sharing of family responsibilities and an increased investment in the care economy; and tackles violence and harassment in the world of work". 13

7. **The ILO has engaged in long-standing efforts to promote decent work in the care economy and a life-cycle approach to care.** Its body of international labour standards includes many that are relevant to the care economy, such as the *Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952* (No. 102). A number of standards specifically address care professions, such as the *Nursing Personnel Convention* (No. 149) and *Recommendation* (No. 157), 1977, and the *Domestic Workers Convention* (No. 189) and *Recommendation* (No. 201), 2011. In addition, many other standards on specific aspects of decent work and with a broad scope of application also cover, and are relevant to, care professions. Others also address the situation of workers with family responsibilities, such as the *Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention* (No. 156) and *Recommendation* (No. 165), 1981, and the *Maternity Protection Convention* (No. 183) and *Recommendation* (No. 191), 2000. 14
8. **More recently, the ILO has furthered its efforts to highlight the opportunities and challenges of care work**, including the importance of care work to a just transition to environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all. 15 A global survey into the attitudes and perceptions of women and men found that balance between work and family remains the main challenge for women in entering the labour market and remaining and advancing in it. 16 A landmark ILO report, *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*, examined the global dimensions of unpaid and paid care work and their relationship with the changing world of work. It highlighted persistent gender inequalities in households and in the labour market, and their inextricable links with care work. It also emphasized the care economy as an engine of decent job creation and the need to tackle **decent work deficits** in the relevant sectors. In 2022, the ILO published *Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work*, which provides a global overview of national laws and practices regarding care policies, as well as childcare and long-term care services, and assesses persistent gaps in protection. It concluded with a call for investments in a package of care policies for a strong care economy and as a pathway to building a better and more gender-equal world. Pursuant to decisions of the ILO Governing Body, the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations also published, in 2022 and 2023, two General Surveys examining the implementation of several international labour standards relevant for the care economy. 17
9. In the broader United Nations (UN) system, the report of the Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda*, calls for "rethinking the care economy" by valuing unpaid care work in economic models, and also investing in quality paid care as part of essential public services and social protection arrangements. 18 This also means improving pay and working conditions for care workers to help achieve the SDGs. The UN Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, launched by the UN Secretary-General in 2021, signals the collective response of UN agencies to create jobs and enhance social protection coverage, and underscores the need to

<sup>13</sup> ILO, *Resolution and conclusions concerning the second recurrent discussion on labour protection*, ILC.111/Resolution IV (2023), point. 23(h).

<sup>14</sup> Although not an international labour standard, the ILO/UNESCO *Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers* (1966) is also relevant.

<sup>15</sup> ILO, *Gender Equality and Inclusion for a Just Transition in Climate Action: A Practical Guide*, forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> ILO and Gallup, *Towards a Better Future for Women and Work: Voices of Women and Men*, 2017, 39.

<sup>17</sup> ILO, *Securing Decent Work for Nursing Personnel and Domestic Workers, Key Actors in the Care Economy*, ILC.110/III(B), 2022; ILO, *Achieving Gender Equality at Work*, ILC.111/III(B), 2023.

<sup>18</sup> UN, *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General*, 2021, para. 39.

## 7 Interesting Facts

The ILO's labour standards for professions like nursing and domestic work reflect a long standing commitment to regulate and protect even the most undervalued and informal care roles. These frameworks help ensure rights and protections reach all areas of the care economy.

## 8 Definition

Decent work deficits refer to the lack or decline of essential conditions such as fair wages, occupational safety, social protection and the right to unionize. These gaps undermine the core objectives of the ILO and are particularly acute in the care sector.

"facilitate women's economic inclusion, including through large-scale investment in the care economy and equal pay, and more support for women entrepreneurs".<sup>19</sup> Investing in the care economy is also an important contribution to the follow-up to the High-Level Commission on Health, Employment and Economic Growth, endorsed by the ILO and the World Health Organization (WHO), and the thematic action tracks of the Transforming Education Summit, held in New York in September 2022. In 2023, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 29 October as International Day of Care and Support to promote the need to invest in the care economy and to create robust, resilient and gender-responsive, disability-inclusive and age-sensitive care and support systems.<sup>20</sup>

10. Against this background, at its 344th Session (March 2022) the **Governing Body** of the International Labour Office **decided to place on the agenda of the 112th Session (2024) of the International Labour Conference, for a general discussion, an item on decent work and the care economy** 21 to "provide an opportunity for a timely and integrated review of developments concerning care work, across the ILO's strategic objectives, as a critical area for advancing the transformative agenda for gender equality; for equality, diversity and inclusion, and for promoting **an ecosystem of care for all**".<sup>22</sup>

## About this report

11. **This report aims to contribute to an informed general discussion** of the issues surrounding the care economy. It examines the role of the ILO and its constituents in ensuring decent work in the care economy and the importance of the care economy to decent work.
12. **It presents the ILO's framework for understanding the care economy**, and the social organization of care for gender equality. It recognizes that collecting comparable, harmonized and comprehensive data on the care economy and care work is an important area of further development. The report examines the situation with regard to the fundamental principles and rights at work and the working conditions of care workers, and underscores the connection between decent work for care workers and quality of care services. The report makes visible the prominent role that workers play in the care economy across all regions and the critical importance of the care economy for gender equality. It reviews relevant international labour standards for the care economy as well as global, regional and national policies and their evolution. These include social protection and labour protection policies, including non-discrimination, migration policies and employment policies, including macroeconomic policies. The report looks forward to consider the impact of transformative changes in the world of work, particularly in relation to new technologies, climate and demographics, and their impact on the care economy, as well as the need for effective social dialogue for a strong care economy.
13. **Examples of efforts to strengthen the care economy** are presented, including investing in care work, care policies and care services, as well as improving the working conditions of care workers, including by supporting the transition to formal jobs for care workers in the informal economy. The report explores the dynamic and interconnected relationship between: care and universal social protection, investment in care to create decent employment opportunities in the care economy, and the positive outcomes for employers, workers, care recipients and society as a

<sup>19</sup> *Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, Theme: Care Economy and Health Workers*, undated, 7.

<sup>20</sup> UN General Assembly, *Resolution on the International Day of Care and Support*, A/RES/77/317 (2023).

<sup>21</sup> ILO, *Minutes of the 344th Session of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office*, GB.344/PV, para. 99(a)(ii).

<sup>22</sup> ILO, *Agenda of the International Labour Conference: Agenda of future sessions of the Conference*, GB.344/INTS/3/1, 2022, para. 48.

## 10 Something to think about

What would it take to design a truly inclusive care system that supports caregivers and recipients across every stage of life regardless of gender, age, disability status or socioeconomic background? How can such a system be made sustainable and equitable at both local and global levels.

## Chapter 1

### Why care about the care economy?

16. **The care economy includes all workers in the education, health and social work sectors, domestic workers and individuals who perform unpaid care work.** The care economy is critical for sustained economic development and decent work. Most care work is provided by four institutions: the State, the private sector, the non-profit sector and households.
- 1.1. **The care economy is central to human, social and economic well-being**
17. **The care economy is responsible for the provision of care and services that contribute to the nurturing, support and reproduction of current and future populations. As such, care work sustains life.** There is often a relational aspect to care, which makes care work different from other forms of work. It includes childcare, elder care, care for those with physical and mental illnesses and disabilities, access to treatment for persons living with HIV, education, healthcare, and personal social and domestic services, as well as daily domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, washing and mending. Care work is provided both formally and informally, and in paid and unpaid forms.
18. **Throughout the pandemic, the critical role that healthcare and medical services staff played on the frontline of the response to COVID-19 was very clear.** 24 While economies were in lockdown, care work continued, both within and outside the home, with workers often at risk of disease or death. Most countries issued lists of services that were considered essential for continued economic activity and to meet basic needs, and some categories of care workers were considered to be essential workers, in particular, health workers and those providing long-term care. 25
19. **Educators in the care economy contribute to a better educated and more skilled workforce,** which enterprises need for sustainable growth. 26 The care economy also contributes to producing a healthier workforce in the present and for the future, which can increase productivity, through which businesses and economies can gain a competitive advantage. 27
20. **The care economy is a major generator of employment, with 215 million care workers in care sectors and 70.1 million domestic workers worldwide.** When workers supporting care provision are added, the global care workforce reaches 381 million, or 11.5 per cent of total global employment. 28

<sup>24</sup> See the 2022 General Survey, *Securing Decent Work for Nursing Personnel and Domestic Workers*, and the related discussion in *Information and Reports on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations: Report of the Committee on the Application of Standards*, ILC 110/Record No. 4B/P.II.

<sup>25</sup> ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2023: The Value of Essential Work*, 2023, 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> A 2021 report of the World Economic Forum, *Upskilling for Shared Prosperity*, estimates that closing skills gaps could add an extra US\$5-6.5 trillion to global GDP by 2030 (figure 1).

<sup>27</sup> World Economic Forum, "A Healthy Workforce is Good for Business. Here's Why", WEF Better Business Blog, 19 July 2023.

<sup>28</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 8.

### 16 Interesting Facts

In many contexts the functioning of the care economy relies heavily on unpaid work carried out by women. This systemic dependence reinforces gender inequalities and limits progress on labour rights, social protection and inclusive economic participation.

### 17 Interesting Facts

Care work sustains life through emotional, psychological and social dimensions that are not captured by traditional economic frameworks. Recognizing its relational nature challenges standard definitions of labor and invites a deeper understanding of its true value.

### 20 Something to think about

What would it take to design a truly inclusive care system that supports caregivers and recipients across every stage of life regardless of gender, age, disability status or socioeconomic background? How can such a system be made sustainable and equitable at both local and global levels.

21. **A significant share of all young workers** aged 15–29 years (10.7 per cent) were working in healthcare, social work and education or as domestic workers just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In absolute numbers, this represents 47.8 million young workers: 33.6 million young women (20.2 per cent of all young female workers) and 14.2 million young men (5.1 per cent of all young male workers), although there were regional variations. 29 Care sectors are expanding. From 2000 to 2019, employment in health and social work grew by 49 per cent in countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
22. **According to ILO estimates, global employment in care and related jobs could grow from 206 million in 2015 to 358 million by 2030.** With sufficient investment to meet the SDGs, this figure could grow to 475 million. 30 In India, for example, a 2023 study finds that an additional 22.74 million workers need to be recruited to meet the 2030 national health and education policy targets. 31 The employment-generating aspect of the care economy is highlighted in the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions. 32
23. **Care work contributes significantly to global gross domestic product (GDP).** In 2018, the ILO estimated that the health, education and social care sectors constitute **8.7 per cent of global GDP.** Unpaid care contributes to 9 per cent of global GDP, or US\$11 trillion (purchasing power parity of 2011). 33 In some countries, such as Australia, conservative estimates suggest that if unpaid care work was given an equivalent monetary value, it would exceed 40 per cent of GDP. 34
24. **The care economy is critical for addressing inequalities and promoting social justice.** The care economy is heterogeneous and includes workers with various levels of skills, education and income. Occupational segregation is a feature of the care economy. Within healthcare, women make up 70 per cent of the global workforce, 35 and a disproportionate share of unpaid care work – three quarters – is undertaken by women. Unpaid care work is among the main barriers to women's labour force participation and a driver of gender inequalities in the world of work. While some care jobs are highly paid, many, including those of domestic workers, are characterized by low pay and informality. **Women domestic workers earn half (51.1 per cent) of the average monthly wages of other employees,** 36 while nurses and midwives are paid less than the average for high-skilled workers in 34 out of 49 countries. 37 Improving conditions of work in the care economy, including through the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, is one of the priority policy areas of the ILO's comprehensive and integrated strategy to reduce and prevent inequalities in the world of work.

## 1.2. The changing world of work has implications for the care economy

25. Demographic shifts have direct implications for both the demand for care and the supply of labour. Global life expectancy has continuously risen over the past two decades, and older people form an increasingly large share of the population in all world regions, most notably in high-

### 24 Something to think about

If women domestic workers earn only half the average monthly wages of other employees, what structural barriers continue to undervalue their labor? What would it take to close this wage gap and ensure equitable compensation for all care workers?

<sup>29</sup> ILO, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2022: Investing in Transforming Futures for Young People*, 2022, 170.

<sup>30</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, section 5.4.1.

<sup>31</sup> ILO and NITI Aayog, *Estimating the Employment Generation Potential of India's Care Economy*, forthcoming, 33.

<sup>32</sup> ILO et al., *The Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions: Implementation Strategy*, n.d., 9.

<sup>33</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 49.

<sup>34</sup> economic Security4Women, *Counting on Care Work in Australia: Final Report*, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> WHO, *Delivered by Women, Led by Men: A Gender and Equity Analysis of the Global Health and Social Workforce*, 2019, 13.

<sup>36</sup> 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)*, 2021, 154.

<sup>37</sup> ILO, "Nurses and Midwives: Overworked, Underpaid, Undervalued", *ILOSTAT Blog*.

income countries. 38 In 2015, 2.1 billion people were in need of care: 1.9 billion children under the age of 15, of whom 0.8 billion under 6 years of age, and 0.2 billion older persons. Due to the ageing population, 2.3 billion people are expected to need care by 2030. While the care dependency ratio will decrease, the number of care recipients will be higher, as although the number of children aged 0–5 years will remain constant, there will be an additional 0.1 billion children aged 6–14 years and an additional 0.1 billion older persons. 39

26. An ageing population means that planning is required for older persons' long-term care. Social protection policies are central to a life-cycle approach that promotes healthy ageing, including ensuring that older persons can access long-term care without hardship. 40 In high-income countries, the demand for and provision of care are especially impacted by demographic ageing, alongside lower fertility rates, women's increasing participation in the paid labour force, changing household structures, and geographical mobility that stretches families over long distances.

#### Box 1. Demographic shifts and care work in China

Care work is of growing importance to China's economic and social development. From the demand side, demographic change, prolonged life expectancy and population ageing, together with policy adjustments such as the relaxation of the "one-child policy", create an increased need for care provision and services. In terms of supply, Chinese households have become smaller, and the dependency ratio has risen (that is, the share of the working-age population as part of the total population has shrunk), resulting in reduced capacity of families to provide care for their members. At the same time, the emerging paid care sector remains fragile. This mismatch between demand for and supply of care services is reflected in the heavy burden of unpaid care work undertaken within the household – work that is largely undertaken by women.

Source: ILO and UN-Women, *Care Work in China: Who Does Care Work, What Is Its Economic Value and How Has It Been Affected by COVID-19?*, 2023, 2.

27. At the same time, there are many lower-income countries, particularly on the African continent, that have large and growing youth populations and will need to create jobs for young people to reap the demographic dividend. In 2022, 23.5 per cent of young people globally were not in employment, education or training: the share among young women is higher, linked to unpaid care work. 41 Ageing in some parts of the world and youthful populations in other parts will have implications for labour supply and labour demand and how these are to be addressed in the care economy.
28. Climate change may increase the demand for care work, both paid and unpaid. More severe desertification, deforestation, natural disasters, persistent drought and extreme weather events will have impacts on the world of work, including gendered impacts, with implications for how care work is distributed outside and within households. The increased demands placed on households due to crises triggered by extreme weather events often fall on women, who then spend more time on the work of caring for the family. 42 Furthermore, climate-related health

<sup>38</sup> According to data from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2019 and World Population Prospects 2022*. Lou Tossier, Nathalie De Wulf and Yuta Momose, "Long-Term Care in the Context of Population Ageing: A Rights-Based Approach to Universal Coverage", ILO Working Paper No. 82, 2022, 10.

<sup>39</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, xxix.

<sup>40</sup> Tossier, De Wulf and Momose, 9.

<sup>41</sup> ILO, *Global Employment Policy Review 2023: Macroeconomic Policies for Recovery and Structural Transformation*, 2023, Ch. 3.

<sup>42</sup> ILO, "Mainstreaming Care Work to Combat the Effects of Climate Change" in *Green Jobs, an Opportunity for Women in Latin America. Climate Change, Gender and Just Transition*, 2023, 2.

#### 25 Did You Know That

This demographic reality underscores the massive scale of global care dependency, with children representing the overwhelming majority of care recipients. The concentration of 0.8 billion children under 6 years emphasizes the critical early childhood period requiring intensive care provision, which has profound implications for women's labor force participation and economic development strategies.

#### 25 Interesting facts

The projected 200 million increase in care recipients within five years represents a fundamental shift in global demographic patterns. This transformation will particularly affect high-income countries experiencing rapid population ageing, requiring substantial adjustments in care infrastructure, workforce planning, and social protection systems to address the growing dependency ratio.

#### 26 Something to think about

What strategies can help governments manage the immediate fiscal demands of long term care planning while also leveraging the economic potential of healthy and productive ageing populations?

#### 27 Did You Know That

Nearly one in four young people worldwide are out of employment, education or training, with higher rates among young women due to unpaid care work. This highlights a major loss of human capital and reinforces gendered patterns of exclusion from economic opportunity.

#### 27 Something to think about

How can policy frameworks address the rising intersection between climate change and care needs, especially in areas where extreme weather events intensify unpaid care burdens for women?



impacts may increase the demand for healthcare services. Rural women, children, older people, and indigenous and tribal peoples are particularly affected by the care-related impacts of climate change.

29. Recent research also shows that, on average, care jobs produce a fraction of the greenhouse gas emissions of other sectors. In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, a care job produces 26 times fewer emissions than a manufacturing job, 200 times fewer than an agricultural job, and 1,500 times fewer than oil and gas jobs.<sup>43</sup> However, this will vary across the different types of care jobs and sectors.
30. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and machine learning, are altering health and social care by assisting in medical diagnosis and treatment. Use of "telecare" and "telehealth" products such as personal alarms and self-monitoring devices for blood pressure, diabetes, asthma and so on, is increasing. Tasks such as taking vital signs or administering medication may be delegated to machines, enabling nurses to attend to more complex patient care, 44 provided that workers have the necessary training to use these technologies. However, the relational nature of care work may limit the extent to which technologies, including robots and artificial intelligence, can replace human labour. 45 The digital divide between high- and low-income countries – and between women and men – will also influence the extent to which technologies can support care work. 46

#### □ Box 2. Japan's Robot Strategy for long-term care

In 2015, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry adopted the Robot Strategy to meet the increase in care needs by 2020 due to the ageing of the population. The objective is to reduce nurses' workload and create a better working environment by using robotic nursing equipment. The Strategy envisages the use of technology to support older persons who need care to continue living independently.

Source: ILO, *Securing Decent Work for Nursing Personnel and Domestic Workers, Key Actors in the Care Economy*, 71.

31. Digital labour platforms that provide care services are increasing in number. 47 From 2010 to 2020, a time of change, the number of digital labour platforms for care workers rose more than eightfold (figure 1). 48 Digital labour platforms may help domestic workers, particularly migrant domestic workers, access jobs. 49 In addition, there are digital labour platforms that offer mental health services (online therapy and counselling), disability support services and childcare services.

<sup>43</sup> Rebekah Diski, *A Green and Caring Economy: Final Report*, Women's Budget Group and Wen, 2022, 8.

<sup>44</sup> ILO, *Securing Decent Work for Nursing Personnel and Domestic Workers*, 71.

<sup>45</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Paweł Gmyrek, Janine Berg and David Bescond, "Generative AI and Jobs: A Global Analysis of Potential Effects on Job Quantity and Quality", ILO Working Paper No. 96, 2023, section 5.

<sup>47</sup> Paula Rodríguez-Modrón, Astrid Agero-Caldéron and Purificación López-Igual, "Platform Work in the Domestic and Home Care Sector: New Mechanisms of Invisibility and Exploitation of Women Migrant Workers", *Gender & Development* 30, No. 3 (2022): 619–635.

<sup>48</sup> ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers*, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Francisca Pereyra, Lorena Poblete and Ania Tuziani, "Plataformas digitales de servicio doméstico y condiciones laborales: El caso de Argentina (ILO, 2023); Abigail Hunt and Fortunate Machingura, "A Good Gig: The Rise of On-Demand Domestic Work", ODI Working Paper No. 7, December 2016.

## 29 Interesting Facts

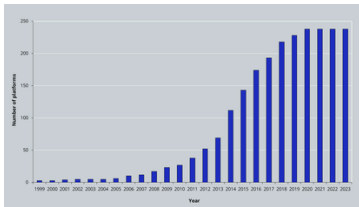
Care jobs have significantly lower carbon emissions than other sectors, including manufacturing, agriculture and fossil fuels. This positions the care economy as a strategic area for green investment that supports both environmental goals and social wellbeing.

## 30 Something to think about

How far should automation go in care provision before it begins to compromise the human connection essential to quality care? What roles must remain grounded in empathy, presence and professional judgment even as technology advances?

Care-related digital labour platforms are growing fastest in high-income countries.<sup>50</sup> This has implications for both demand for and supply of care, and for how such platforms are governed.<sup>51</sup>

□ **Figure 1. Evolution of active platforms connecting businesses and clients to care workers globally, 1999–2023**



Note: Data includes elderly care, childcare, patient care, home cleaning and other home-based tasks. Only currently active companies in the Crunchbase global repository of companies are included. Source: Uma Rani and Matias Golman, *Rise in Domestic Work and Care Platforms: Experiences of Workers from Select Developing Countries* (ILO, forthcoming).

32. **Another impact of digital technologies on the care economy relates to how such technologies affect working hours and support work-life balance for all, including care workers.** The flexible work arrangements that were put in place during the COVID-19 crisis enabled workers to continue working when childcare, education and other care services were unavailable. Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic measures, flexible and family-friendly working arrangements and telework can promote work-life balance, with implications for how paid and unpaid care is provided.<sup>52</sup> Telework can also increase care needs if it affects workers' health, safety and well-being.<sup>53</sup>

### 1.3. Recent international developments prioritizing the care economy

33. **Recent international developments have promoted progress towards a stronger care economy.** The UN Secretary-General's report, *Our Common Agenda*, includes a key measure of

<sup>50</sup> ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work*, 2021, 40.

<sup>51</sup> The subject of decent work in the platform economy will be discussed by constituents at the International Labour Conference in 2025 and 2026 with a view to creating a new standard on the subject.

<sup>52</sup> Haejung Chung, "Company-Level Family Policies: Who Has Access to It and What Are Some of Its Outcomes?", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Family Policy*, ed. Renée Nieuwenhuis and Wim Van Lancker, 535–573 (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>53</sup> ILO and WHO, *Healthy and Safe Telework*, Technical Brief, 2021, 5–10; ILO, *Leaving No One Behind: Building Inclusive Labour Protection in an Evolving World of Work*, ILC.111/Report V, 2023, para. 83.

## 32 Interesting Facts

Digital technologies influence more than task performance by shaping work schedules and conditions. When applied strategically they can improve work life balance for care workers and unpaid caregivers alike while promoting more inclusive and resilient care systems.

"large-scale investment in the care economy". 54 The UN's Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, which is led by the ILO, has a distinct component on investments in the care economy to promote decent working conditions and quality care services. 55 A 2024 UN system policy paper on transforming care systems calls for a paradigm shift "towards a society that prioritizes the sustainability of life and care for the planet; guarantees the human rights of people who receive or provide care; and promotes a model of co-responsibility for the provision of care with the State as a primary duty bearer". 56 The policy recommendations align with the call of *Our Common Agenda* for a new social contract and UN system-wide work to advance measures of economic progress beyond GDP.

34. March 2021 saw the launch of the Global Alliance for Care, a multisectoral initiative by Mexico's National Institute of Women and UN-Women. The ILO, along with over 160 members, joined to advance global and national care work agendas. **The ILO agenda for investment in the care economy contributes to the Global Alliance for Care**, and other national and international initiatives, while also offering an avenue for action and a programmatic platform to scale up and accelerate progress in investing in care. 57
35. In October 2023, the UN Human Rights Council adopted, by consensus, a resolution on the centrality of care and support from a human rights perspective. 58 In addition, **the UN General Assembly proclaimed 29 October to be the International Day of Care and Support, beginning in 2023**. The ILO has provided support to each of these.
36. The 2020 G20 Leaders' Declaration includes a commitment to address the unequal **distribution of unpaid work** and care responsibilities between men and women as a means of advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. 59 The G7 Labour and Employment Ministers' Declaration in 2023, which focused on the need to invest in human capital and decent work, commits to promoting high-quality care-related jobs. 60
37. There have also been notable regional developments in thinking and action on the care economy. The Buenos Aires Commitment, adopted at the 15th session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, recognizes care as a right to provide and receive care and to exercise self care. The Commitment calls for measures to move towards a fair organization of care and overcome the gendered division of labour in care. 61 The Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) guides the development of the care economy in complex crises and challenging contexts. 62 Meanwhile, the European Care Strategy seeks to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services, while improving the situations of care receivers and those who provide care. In Africa, care has been embedded in regional declarations and treaties such as the African Union's Solemn Declaration on Gender

<sup>54</sup> UN, *Our Common Agenda*, para. 31.

<sup>55</sup> ILO et al., *The Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions: Implementation Strategy*, n.d., 9.

<sup>56</sup> UN, *Transforming Care Systems in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals and Our Common Agenda*, forthcoming. This forthcoming policy paper (March 2024) represents an inter-agency and UN system-wide effort to inform and harmonize UN agency efforts on care.

<sup>57</sup> ILO, *Care at Work*, 44.

<sup>58</sup> UN, "Press Release on Human Rights Council Concludes Fifty-Fourth Regular Session after Adopting 36 Resolutions and One President's Statement", 13 October 2023.

<sup>59</sup> G20, *Leaders' Declaration*, Riyadh, November 2020, para. 25.

<sup>60</sup> ILO, "ILO Welcomes G7 Commitment to Invest in Human Capital and Decent Work", press release, 24 April 2023.

<sup>61</sup> ECLAC and UN-Women, *Buenos Aires Commitment*, 2023, paras 7 and 8.

<sup>62</sup> ASEAN, *ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy*, 2021.

### 34 Something to think about

How can global alliances like the Global Alliance for Care shape national priorities and resource allocation? What strategies ensure these collaborations translate into concrete improvements in care infrastructure and labor protections?

### 35 Interesting Facts

The designation of an International Day of Care and Support reflects increasing global recognition of care work as a public responsibility. It also offers a focal point for awareness, policy dialogue and collective action to strengthen support for caregivers.

### 36 Definition

Distribution of unpaid work refers to the way care tasks are socially assigned, often based on gender. This unequal division reinforces disparities in time, income and opportunity and remains a key barrier to gender equality at home and in the workplace.

Equality in Africa, which included increasing budgetary allocations to address “women’s burden of care”, 63 and the 2007 Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community, which included commitments for Partner States to cooperate in health activities. 64 The 2014 Cairo Declaration referred to the need to “recognize unpaid care work and redistribution of wealth through social protection policies and access to basic services”. 65

### Box 3. The European Care Strategy

In 2022, the European Commission introduced the European Care Strategy to “ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services” while prioritizing quality care provision for care recipients and decent work for care workers. The Strategy recommends that, among other measures, Member States of the European Union:

- (1) establish ambitious targets to increase enrolment in early childhood care and education services, to 50 per cent of children under the age of 3 and 96 per cent of children between age 3 and the compulsory age for starting primary education;
- (2) develop national action plans to improve the availability, accessibility and quality of long-term care services, including by increasing the amount and type of long-term care services available, and ensuring that they are accessible to persons with disabilities;
- (3) improve the working conditions of care sector workers, by promoting collective bargaining and social dialogue, ensuring safe and healthy work environments, designing training systems that encourage lifelong learning for care workers, and ratifying and implementing the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

Source: European Commission, “A European Care Strategy for Caregivers and Care Recipients”, press release, 7 September 2022.

## 1.4. ILO developments on care

38. In recent years, the ILO has re-emphasized the importance of the care economy. As a road map for a human-centred future, the Centenary Declaration prominently recognized the relevance of the care economy for a transformative agenda for gender equality. As a result, **a specific focus on supporting investments in the care economy and work-family balance was included in the ILO programme and budget starting from the 2020-21 exercise.** Following the devastations of the COVID-19 pandemic, and building on the Centenary Declaration while stressing social dialogue as an essential tool, **the 2021 Global Call to Action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient calls for appropriate public and private investment in the care economy** in the context of a job-rich recovery with decent work and inclusive economic growth. In the recurrent discussion on employment at the 110th Session of the Conference (2022), ILO constituents highlighted the importance of quality care services, and in the second recurrent discussion on labour protection (social protection) the following year, ILO constituents called for increased investment in the care economy for advancing the transformative agenda for gender equality.
39. The ILO’s work on the care economy has expanded in recent years. In the 2020-21 biennium, there was a deepened consensus on addressing care work from a gender perspective and in a holistic manner. Four Member States achieved results along these lines during the 2020-21

<sup>63</sup> African Union, *Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa*, Assembly/AU/Ded.12 (III) Rev.1, July 2004.

<sup>64</sup> EAC, *The Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community*, November 1999, Ch. 21.

<sup>65</sup> UN-Women, *Cairo Declaration*, High-level Meeting on Implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for Women and Girls, Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in the Arab Region, February 2014.

### 38 Interesting Facts

Including care economy investments and work-family balance in the ILO’s formal budget process reflects a strategic shift. This approach embeds care into long-term planning and reinforces the institutional commitment to structural support beyond emergency responses.

### 38 Something to think about

If care work is essential to an inclusive and resilient recovery, what policy tools can ensure that investments in this sector are both sustainable and equitable? How might this shift challenge traditional measures of economic value and reshape priorities moving forward?

biennium. 66 This increased dramatically in the 2022–23 biennium, as the Office stepped up its efforts to support constituents in promoting investments in the care economy, leading to **the adoption or implementation of strategies or policy measures in eight Member States and improvements in the working conditions of care workers in twelve countries across all regions.** 67 During the 2022–23 biennium, many more governments tried to reduce the burden of unpaid care work by extending the duration of care leave, improving access to childcare facilities, or providing care-related allowances to pay for care services for children and other persons in need of care. 68

40. The context of multiple crises prompted the Governing Body to place an item on the agenda of the International Labour Conference for a general discussion on decent work and the care economy, so as to have a timely and integrated review of developments concerning care work across the ILO's strategic objectives. The discussion will provide further guidance on promoting decent work in the care economy in a coherent and integrated manner, based on the understanding that the care economy can be a motor for sustainable development, and will also address the interconnected needs of people performing paid and unpaid care work in the care economy.

## 1.5. Concluding remarks

41. In light of the transformations in the world of work and the multiple crisis that the world has faced in recent years, care work has moved centre stage in global debates and discussions, highlighting the importance of the care economy for economic social and environmental sustainability. The ILO has played a leading role in raising awareness of the importance of care work and policy measures to address decent work in the care economy. In a fast-changing world of work, further discussions, reflections and guidance on the ILO's work in this area are important to ensure that ILO research and policy advice remain relevant, practical and cutting-edge in order to advance gender equality and social justice.

<sup>66</sup> ILO, *ILO Programme Implementation 2020–21*, ILC.110/Report I(A), 2022, 50.

<sup>67</sup> ILO, *ILO Programme Implementation 2022–23*, forthcoming, para. 183.

<sup>68</sup> ILO, *ILO Programme Implementation 2022–23*, para. 184.

## Chapter 2

### What is the care economy?

42. The term “care economy” is now used throughout the UN system and in a wide body of academic and socio-economic literature. 69 Arguably, it is a term that has entered common language; however, there is no single widely accepted concept or definition of what the care economy is. Other terms used to refer to the provision and receipt of care include the “social organization of care”, “care systems” or “health and care systems”, and “care ecosystems”. These terms may not be interchangeable.
43. **Reaching a common understanding of the care economy is an important step** if the overall aims are to ensure that: quality care is available to all; care is provided in conditions that uphold the rights of care workers and care recipients; and care provision promotes rather than hinders equality and inclusion. **Such an understanding is important in the context of the vast differences in the social, economic and political contexts in which care is provided around the world**, as well as the varying terminology used for care jobs and occupations and the heterogeneity of the care workforce. A universal and common understanding of the “care economy” can help ensure that care provision is supported by a legal, policy and investment framework that enables actors to operate in a stable and sustainable environment. This chapter aims to advance that common understanding by setting out key concepts of the care economy: what “care work” is, how and by whom care is provided, and the conditions under which care is provided.

#### 2.1. What is care work, who provides it and how is it provided?

44. **Care work is delivered throughout the life cycle and covers the activities and relations that ensure the sustainability and quality of life.** This includes building human capabilities and developing agency, autonomy, opportunities and resilience, while also meeting people’s physical, psychological, cognitive and developmental needs. 70
45. **Care work consists of overlapping and complementary activities. Direct care** can be described as “personal”, “relational” or “nurturing”, such as feeding a baby, nursing a sick partner, supporting an older person to take a bath, or teaching young children. **Indirect care** activities are sometimes referred to as household work or “non-relational care”, and include tasks such as cleaning and cooking. **Care work is both paid and unpaid.**
46. **Paid care work is delivered at the intersection of health, social and educational systems**, and may be provided in a range of settings, including hospitals, long-term care facilities, schools, communities, the workplace and private households. 71 **It comprises a wide range of occupations**, such as nurses, teachers, doctors, psychologists, childcare workers, early childhood care and education workers, domestic workers, personal care and support workers, long-term

#### 43 Something to think about

How can international frameworks foster a common understanding of care that respects cultural, economic and political differences in how care is structured and valued across regions?

#### 46 Interesting Facts

The care economy spans a wide range of professions that are often overlooked in policy and data systems. Recognizing this diversity is essential for designing inclusive strategies that support the full care workforce and elevate its social and economic value.

69 UN, *Transforming Care Systems in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals and Our Common Agenda*, forthcoming.

70 ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 6; ILO, *Care at Work*, section 8.2; Sheryllyn MacGregor, Seema Arora-Jonsson and Maeva Cohen, *Caring in a Changing Climate: Centering Care Work in Climate Action* (Oxford, 2022), 15.

71 ILO, *Securing Decent Work for Nursing Personnel and Domestic Workers*, 25.

care workers, community health workers and social workers. 72 Although not the main focus of this report, the care workforce can also include the activities of workers engaged in indirect care activities in care sectors, for instance cafeteria workers. 73

#### Box 4. Key terms for care work

**Care work:** activities and relations that ensure the sustainability and quality of life. Care work can be direct and indirect, unpaid and paid:

- **Direct care work:** personal care activities, sometimes referred to as “nurturing” or “relational” care, for example, nursing a sick partner, carrying out health check-ups or teaching young children.
  - **Indirect care work:** activities that are not face-to-face, but provide the preconditions for personal care, such as cleaning and cooking.
  - **Unpaid care work:** activities undertaken without a monetary reward.
- Paid care workers/care workforce:** people who perform care work for pay or profit, including nurses, teachers, doctors, psychologists, childcare workers, early childhood care and education workers, domestic workers, personal care and support workers, long-term care workers, community workers and social workers. This can also include indirect care.

Sources: ILO, *Statistical Definitions of Care Work*, ICLS/21/2023/Room Document 8, 2023, 14; ILO, *Care Work and CareJobs for the Future of Decent Work*, xxxiii and 174; ILO, *From Global Care Crisis to Quality Care at Home: The Case for Including Domestic Workers in Care Policies and Ensuring Their Rights at Work*, forthcoming.

47. The care workforce is highly **heterogeneous**, with workers who differ markedly in education levels, skills, and remuneration and work in very different sectors. **High levels of vertical and horizontal gender-based occupational segregation persist.** With over 70 per cent of the global workforce comprised of women, paid care work remains largely feminized, especially at lower income levels. 74 In care jobs, women, migrants and racial minorities are overrepresented within lower-paid, lower-status occupations. 75 Men remain overrepresented in higher-paid occupations, such as medical doctors, despite some evidence of more women entering these professions in recent years and more men entering the nursing profession. 76

#### Box 5. The global care economy in numbers

- In 2018, the global paid care workforce (including all persons employed in the education sector and health and social work sector, as well as all domestic workers) comprised 249 million women and 132 million men.
- **Health and education workers make up the largest part of the care economy, and represent 6.5 per cent of total global employment.**

<sup>72</sup> For information on care sectors and care activities under the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) and the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC rev. 4), see “Worker and sector profiles (PHOFILES database): Paid care workers”, ILOSTAT Database Description.

<sup>73</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> WHO, *Delivered by Women, Led by Men*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Kjersti Mjike Østbakken, Julia Orupabo and Marjan Nadim, “The Hierarchy of Care Work: How Immigrants Influence the Gender-Segregated Labor Market”, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 30, No. 3 (2023): 818–843; ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers*, 30, 35.

<sup>76</sup> ILO and WHO, *The Gender Pay Gap in the Health and Care Sector: A Global Analysis in the Time of COVID-19*, 2022, 36; WHO, *Delivered by Women, Led by Men*, 2.

#### 47 Definition

Heterogeneous means made up of many different types. For example, the care workforce is heterogeneous because it includes people with different skills, education levels, and pay.

#### 47 Something to think about

If health and education workers are such an important part of the care economy, why are so many of them still paid so little? Should care jobs be treated more like a public service, with better pay and support from the government?

- \* Domestic workers employed directly by households constitute 25 per cent of the paid care workforce.
- \* Women perform 76.2 per cent of the total amount of unpaid care work: 16 billion hours per day – 3.2 times more time than men.
- \* In 2018, 606 million women were unavailable for employment due to unpaid care work, compared to only 41 million men.
- \* Unpaid care work represented a total of US\$11 trillion in purchasing power parity in 2011.
- \* Women migrant and domestic workers constitute a significant portion of the paid care workforce in many countries of the world. For example, within OECD countries, 90 per cent of care workers are women, and 20 per cent are foreign-born.
- \* In high-income countries, a migrant care worker is likely to earn 19.6 per cent less than a non-migrant care worker.

Sources: ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future* (Decent Work); ILO, *From Global Care Crisis to Quality Care at Home* (ILO, *The Migrant Pay Gap: Understanding Wage Differences between Migrants and Nationals: Executive Summary*, 2020).

48. **Most care work is provided by four institutions: the State, the private sector, the non-profit sector, and families/households.** <sup>77</sup> These institutions allocate care on different terms, including rights, need, availability of money or time, services or infrastructure, and care recipients' ability to pay. The distribution of care work among these institutions varies, as does total care provision. States have a leadership role in paid care provision, including direct provision of care, funding of care and regulation of care providers, and in ensuring the highest attainable standards of quality, safety and health for care workers and care recipients across diverse settings.

#### Box 6. Domestic workers as care workers

Domestic workers provide direct and indirect care services to private households. They can be hired directly by the household or through/by a public or private service provider. Even when counting only those employed directly by households, domestic workers account for 25 per cent of all care workers. Domestic workers often do not have access to labour rights and social protection, and lack access to care rights and services for themselves and their families. These gaps in protection and in access to services are more pronounced among domestic workers facing multiple forms of discrimination based on migration status and ethnic or indigenous origin.

Source: ILO, "Domestic Work as Care Work", policy brief, forthcoming.

49. **Unpaid care work is provided without a monetary reward.** Most unpaid care work occurs as own-use provision of services (also termed unpaid domestic and care work). <sup>78</sup> Intra-household and/or intra-familial work is undertaken by and for members of the same household or by and for relatives living elsewhere, and includes indirect and direct care activities. <sup>79</sup> **The distribution of unpaid care work is highly feminized.**
50. **A common understanding and description of the care economy** can also be advanced through **statistical standardization and data collection.** The ILO, at the request of constituents, has initiated an international statistical standard-setting process and is working to develop a statistical definition, conceptual framework and indicator framework for care work, and recommendations,

<sup>77</sup> This is described as the "care diamond" in Shahra Razavi, *The Political and Social Economy of Care in a Development Context: Conceptual Issues, Research Questions and Policy Options* (UNRISD, 2007), 21.

<sup>78</sup> See section 2.2 for more details.

<sup>79</sup> ILO, *Statistical Definitions of Care Work*, ICLS/21/2023/Room Document 8, 2023, 14.

#### 48 Something to think about

Is it fair that some groups are discriminated against because they have less money or live in areas with fewer resources? Should care be provided on what people need, not what they can afford?

#### 48 Interesting Facts

Domestic workers who are migrants, ethnic minorities, or indigenous people often face the worst working conditions and are excluded from legal protections. One big reason is that many migrant workers have visas tied to their employment, so employers can abuse this power knowing that workers risk imprisonment, fines, or deportation if they try to leave.

#### 49 Something to think about

Are our preconceived ideas about women's roles, like the belief that women should take care of the home and family, shaping who does unpaid care work today?



which will be presented for discussion and possible adoption at the 22nd **International Conference of Labour Statisticians** (2028).<sup>80</sup> By promoting consistency and international comparability, this work will enable the production of comprehensive statistics on care work (both paid and unpaid), those performing it and their characteristics, the conditions involved, and its valuation. 81

#### □ Box 7. Statistical definitions and availability of data on the care economy

In recent years, demand for data on care work and the care economy has increased considerably. Progress has, however, been hampered by the absence of internationally agreed statistical standards to inform measurement and promote consistency and international comparability. As a result, a wide variety of practices are observable among countries, international agencies, non-governmental organizations, and academic researchers. There is growing demand, both from within the wider UN system and from ILO constituents, for an internationally agreed statistical definition of care work.

The ILO is well positioned to coordinate and advance this work. Labour force surveys are an important source of data on care work. Their relevance to, and coverage of, the topic was considerably heightened by the adoption of the statistical definitions on work by the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 2013, which widened the focus of work statistics to include all paid and unpaid work, with clear relevance for the measurement of care work.

In 2023, the 21st International Conference of Labour Statisticians recognized the need to build on this foundation, to provide a framework focused specifically on the measurement of care work. This can address widespread and substantial data gaps, while also promoting comparability across countries. Countries strongly supported the need to establish a consultative process that would develop this framework, providing both definitions and guidance on the range of indicators needed to promote improvements in the range and depth of data available in the future. This process will be launched by the ILO in 2024.

Source: ILO, *Report of the Conference – 21st International Conference of Labour Statisticians*, 2024, paras 104–108.

## 2.2. Organization and distribution of unpaid care work

51. Unpaid care work, paid care work, and other work for pay or profit (paid work) should be understood in relation to one another (Figure 2). The conditions under which both paid and unpaid care work are performed influence each other, and also have a bearing on paid work outside the care economy. This is referred to as the “unpaid care work–paid care work–paid work (other than care) circle”. Depending on how these components relate to each other, inequalities – particularly gender inequalities – may increase or decrease.

<sup>80</sup> In October 2023, the 21st International Conference of Labour Statisticians asked the ILO to progress work to develop new statistical standards to enhance the measurement of care work, for discussion and possible adoption at its 22nd Conference. ILO, *Resolution to amend the 19th ICLS resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization*, ICLS/21/2023/RES. II (2023).

<sup>81</sup> ILO, *Statistical Definitions of Care Work*, 8.

### 50 Definition

The International Conference of Labor Statisticians (ICLS) is a global meeting organized by the International Labor Organization (ILO) where experts make recommendations on how to measure work and employment. These once these recommendations that are called resolutions or guidelines are approved by the ILO become the international standards. These standards help countries collect labor data in the same way, making it easier to compare statistics around the world.

### 50 Did You Know That

In 2023, the 21st International Conference of Labor Statisticians agreed that better data on care work was needed. So countries supported the creation of a global framework to measure care work more accurately and consistently across nations. This process led the ILO to launch a global effort in 2024 to create standards and guidelines for measuring care work more accurately around the world.

Figure 2. The unpaid care work-paid care work-paid work (other than care) circle



Note: Paid care work is a subset of paid work, and all segments of this diagram influence one another. Source: ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 11.

52. Globally, women perform 76.2 per cent of all unpaid care work, with 21.7 per cent of women and 1.5 per cent of men doing unpaid care work full-time.<sup>82</sup> In the absence of (or lack of effective access to) care leave policies and benefits and accessible quality services, this imbalance in unpaid care work forms a major structural barrier to women's labour market participation, with adverse effects on women's well-being and socio-economic opportunities. For example, women's labour force participation, chances of employment, earnings and access to managerial and leadership positions have been shown to decline after childbirth.<sup>83</sup> Conversely, fathers of young children have the highest employment-to-population ratios globally and across all regions.<sup>84</sup>
53. This loss of opportunity arising from how unpaid care work is distributed is sometimes referred to as "time poverty". Other areas where opportunities may be reduced by such time poverty include: transitions into and progression within the labour market; building up social security entitlements, in particular pension entitlements; access to education, training and reskilling; access to and participation in representation and collective action processes such as social dialogue, including collective bargaining; and the achievement of long-term professional careers. Furthermore, insufficient access to decent employment opportunities combined with inadequate labour and social protection contribute to women staying at home, reducing their working hours, working informally, or working as contributing family workers to balance their private and

<sup>82</sup> ILO, *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All*, 2019, 35–36.

<sup>83</sup> ILO, *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality*, 14.

<sup>84</sup> ILO, *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality*, 14; ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 88.

## 52 Did You Know That

Globally, women perform 76.2% of all unpaid care work, and one in five women do this work full-time just compared to 1.5% of men. So without access to paid leave, quality childcare, or supportive workplace policies, many women are forced to stay at home to care for children or family, mostly without pay. This imbalance makes it harder for women to enter and stay in the workforce.

professional lives. <sup>85</sup> In 2018, 606 million women and 41 million men of working age declared themselves to be unavailable for employment or not seeking a job due to unpaid care work. <sup>86</sup> In the United Kingdom, a recent poll found that caring responsibilities prevented 58 per cent of women from applying for a new job or promotion. <sup>87</sup> More widely, lack of affordable care reduces women's chances of labour market participation by nearly 5 percentage points in developing countries, and by 4 percentage points in developed countries. <sup>88</sup>

54. **Uneven sharing of care responsibilities is an underlying factor of the gender pay gap.** For example, women may be prevented from reaching top-level decision-making positions – and the associated higher earnings – as these typically require a greater time commitment and leave limited space for family life. <sup>89</sup> Women are more likely to take breaks from their careers, reduce their working hours or opt for part-time work to balance caregiving responsibilities. The resulting impact on women's earnings over time also affects their career and their pensions later in life. <sup>90</sup>
55. **Intersecting inequalities, typically associated with race, colour, sex, national extraction or social origin,** also influence the distribution of care work, both paid and unpaid. Socio-economically disadvantaged women and girls do more unpaid care work than their wealthier counterparts, who have access to replacement care services. <sup>91</sup> Paid domestic work and other forms of often informal, low-paid care work are frequently done by women in disadvantaged situations, including female migrant workers, women from racial and ethnic minorities, and women from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. High proportions of domestic workers in the labour force are associated with high levels of income inequality. <sup>92</sup>

### 2.3. How are care workers faring?

56. **Decent working conditions are a prerequisite for quality care.** The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for a resilient care sector that is well-staffed and well-trained, where workers and employers can engage in social dialogue, and where decent working conditions, including occupational safety and health, are prioritized. Global comparisons are difficult due to the high level of heterogeneity in the care sector.
57. However, **issues that came to the fore everywhere and that were accentuated during the pandemic include:**
- labour shortages and understaffing;
  - difficulties in recruiting and retaining care workers;
  - excessive working hours and workloads;
  - the physical and emotional intensity of care work; and
  - the importance of adequate health and safety measures, including personal protective equipment and preventing exposure to violence and harassment.

<sup>85</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, section 1.1.2.

<sup>86</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, xxxi.

<sup>87</sup> IPSOS, "Who Cares? Business in the Community & Ipsos Research Reveals the Great Workplace Divide", press release, 7 March 2022.

<sup>88</sup> ILO, "The Gender Gap in Employment: What's Holding Women Back?", ILO InfoStories, February 2022.

<sup>89</sup> ILO, *Women in Business and Management: The Business Case for Change*, 2019, 66.

<sup>90</sup> OECD, "Wide Gap in Pension Benefits between Men and Women", OECD Gender Equality Blog, March 2020.

<sup>91</sup> OxfAM, *Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Global Inequality Crisis*, 2020, 32.

<sup>92</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 236–242.

### 53 Interesting Facts

Domestic workers who are migrants, ethnic minorities, or indigenous people often face the worst working conditions and are excluded from legal protections. One big reason is that many migrant workers have visas tied to their employment, so employers can abuse this power knowing that workers risk imprisonment, fines, or deportation if they try to leave.

### 55 Did You Know That

Care work is not just unequally distributed between gender it is also deeply shaped by race, income, and social status. Women with disadvantaged backgrounds, such as migrant women, are more likely to perform unpaid or poorly care work. While wealthier women can afford to outsource care by typically hiring women with disadvantaged backgrounds.

79. **International migrant care workers** often belong to two, or even three, socio-economically disadvantaged groups. In addition to being overwhelmingly women, they are of a different race, ethnicity or nationality than non-migrant care workers, and are often from a lower-income country. This exposes them to greater risks of discrimination. Their migration status has specific implications for their effective enjoyment of labour rights in the country of destination. Indicators of forced labour are particularly pronounced among migrant domestic workers. Commonly reported instances of violations of domestic workers' rights that create conditions of forced labour include retention of identity documents, debt bondage, excessive working hours and withholding of wages.
80. **Migrant workers are employed in a wide range of care jobs** that require differing qualifications and skill levels, and range from home-based care and domestic work to institution- or centre-based care, including in hospitals and clinics. They have diverse profiles and take different migration pathways from their countries of origin to countries of destination. Some may have lived in a country for a long time, while others have recently arrived. Some are permanent residents; others live and work under temporary labour migration visas. Some possess regular residence and working permits; others might find themselves in informal employment and/or with an irregular migration status. Many were care professionals and care practitioners (doctors, nurses, therapists, teachers, older person caregivers, and domestic workers) in their home countries, while many others never worked – or trained – as a care worker prior to migrating.

## 2.4. Concluding remarks

81. The care economy is not only fundamental to our well-being, it is also an important employer across regions and spanning international borders. Quality care requires quality working conditions, and respect for fundamental principles and rights at work is central to care workers enjoying such conditions. Social dialogue has been instrumental in upholding fundamental principles and rights at work and improving working conditions for care workers. To this end, it is essential to strengthen employers' and workers' organizations and to develop and utilize inclusive and effective social dialogue mechanisms.

### 79 Definition

International migrant care workers- refer to people who move from country to country to perform care jobs like nursing, elder care, or domestic work. These workers often face harsh challenges because they are most commonly women with different races or religions that come from poorer countries.

### 80 Something to think about

How can countries protect the rights of migrant care workers who may have temporary or informal jobs?  
 What changes could help ensure they are treated fairly and not exploited?

## Chapter 5

### Towards decent work in the care economy: Lessons and prospects

154. Care is central to economic growth and development, social justice, and societal and individual well-being. How the provision of care is organized, how the work is distributed, who provides it and under what working conditions are all fundamental to the promotion of decent work and gender equality. Yet the care economy faces emerging challenges from multiple, overlapping crises and conflicts, alongside demographic trends, digitalization and technological change, and climate change.

155. There is not yet a universally agreed definition of the care economy. It is generally agreed, however, that it includes paid and unpaid, and direct and indirect, care work. There are a wide range of workers providing direct care and supporting the provision of direct care, while there are also diverse actors (or providers) from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. The care economy also includes the body of legal and institutional frameworks and policies to support care provision and receipt.

156. Currently, there are extensive gaps in data on the care economy, and the data that is available is typically not comparable. There is growing demand for the development of an internationally agreed statistical definition of care work to guide the production of data on the care economy.

157. Decent work in the care economy ensures quality care provision. However, care workers are a heterogeneous group. While some care workers are highly professionalized and enjoy good pay and decent working conditions, others experience poor job quality, which can lead to poor-quality care. Some care workers facing decent work deficits, such as domestic workers and community care workers, may be excluded from national labour and social security laws. Some care workers are unpaid or underpaid, lack skills recognition and access to skills training and professional development, lack labour and social protection, and are exposed to discriminatory practices and exploitation. Poor working conditions are detrimental to the well-being of care workers and care recipients alike.

158. Realizing the fundamental principles and rights at work and decent working conditions for all care workers is the foundation of a robust care economy. Strong, independent and representative employers' and workers' organizations and respect for freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining are preconditions for social dialogue, including for workers and employers in the care economy. There is a pressing need to promote the voice and representation of organizations of workers and employers – including organizations of domestic workers and the households that employ them, small and medium-sized enterprises, and other groups of workers and employers in the care economy. The incidence of forced labour and child labour remains high among domestic workers, and particular attention and efforts are required to eliminate these violations, including ensuring that migrant domestic workers have effective access to justice. Discrimination and inequality, including in the form of vertical and horizontal occupational segregation, unequal pay, and discrimination-based violence and harassment, are characteristic of certain care jobs, particularly those at the low-paid end of the care sector. Women, particularly those who are further disadvantaged by discrimination based on race or national or social origin, are overrepresented in these jobs. Care sectors are prone to OSH risks that include psychosocial risks, musculoskeletal problems, and biological and chemical

#### 154 Interesting Facts

The care economy faces many challenges: government instability, wars, and other factors. But these pressing issues affect how care is provided and who is able to receive it and who does not.

#### 155 Something to think about

Because there is not one worldwide definition of the care economy, do you think some governments might use this to decide who gets care and who does not and who pays for that care?

#### 156 Something to think about

What problem might arise if we don't have clear, comparable information about the care economy?

#### 158 Something to think about

Why is it important for people and the businesses that employ care workers to also have strong organizations and unions?

hazards. Exposure to violence and harassment may be more likely to occur in care sector jobs, requiring the adoption of dedicated measures. OSH hazards and risks should be identified and addressed in consultation with workers and their organizations.

**159.** Access to care services and care leave policies enables workers with family responsibilities, who provide a large share of unpaid care work, to achieve better work-life balance and improve their attachment to the labour market. Studies show that family-friendly workplace policies improve recruitment and retention, and increase productivity. Implementing these practices may also cover costs for employers by improving employee health and reducing absenteeism. Care leave policies can also promote equality of opportunity and treatment in the labour market by preventing discrimination against workers with family responsibilities. Further, policies on maternity protection and adequately paid parental leave, paternity leave and other forms of care leave can promote a more equal sharing of care between women and men.

**160.** There have been significant improvements in the overall design of care leave policies and services. Positive trends are evident in the ratifications of international labour standards related to care and the availability, duration and source of funding of maternity protection in line with Convention No. 183. Paternity leave rights are also on the rise, cementing fathers' role in caregiving in national legislation. While positive trends in parental leave are more conservative, countries are increasingly providing this entitlement. Equally, there has been an upward trend in employers adopting family-friendly workplace policies, providing childcare and offering breastfeeding breaks and facilities. Despite these strides forward, significant gaps remain in legislation, implementation and funding, which translate into a lack of protection and support for millions of workers and their families across the world, especially caregivers from the most marginal and disadvantaged groups.

**161.** The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for a systemic approach to care to ensure societal and economic resilience, to address inequality and poverty, and to promote social and economic justice. Large-scale investments in the care economy are needed to: strengthen the economy through the creation of quality care jobs; promote labour force participation and access to decent jobs for women; and promote gender equality, well-being, social justice and a just transition.

**162.** A rights-based approach to care, grounded in international labour standards, can promote a well functioning and resilient care economy. The ratification and implementation of international labour standards relevant to the care economy – including the ten fundamental Conventions and those addressing nursing personnel, domestic workers, maternity protection, workers with family responsibilities, and social protection – should be integral to nationally designed and context-specific care policy packages.

**163.** Social dialogue, including collective bargaining, is an efficient and democratic pathway to achieving decent work and ensuring that employment standards serve the interests of both care workers and care employers, thereby enhancing the quality of care.

**164.** Decision-making on care policy should be based on tripartite social dialogue, as well as consultations with and representation of unpaid carers and care recipients, including persons with disabilities and persons requiring long-term care and support. This will ensure that care provision is inclusive and rights-based and that it adequately meets demand and need.

**165.** The SR Framework for Decent Care Work aims to promote coherence across policies on care, social protection, labour protection and non-discrimination, migration, and employment, including macroeconomic policy, to leverage synergies and avoid policies working at cross purposes.

## 159 Interesting Facts

Family friendly policies like paid parental leave, childcare support, and breastfeeding breaks allows workers to maintain a health work and family life balance but also improves productivity by reducing employee turnover.

166. Due to its characteristics of a public good, care requires adequate public financing. Where care is an individualized responsibility based upon the ability to pay, the resulting gaps in care provision come at a high cost to individuals, to society and to the economy. The provision of, access to and receipt of care should be based on principles of solidarity, equity and universality and the leadership of the State. Although considerable progress has been made in the recognition of care as a public good and collective responsibility, expectations and norms around "women's" caring roles and responsibilities persist.

167. Macroeconomic policies can provide a conducive environment for investments in care and can influence the distribution of paid and unpaid care work, and the generation of decent jobs in the care economy. This requires reallocating resources and expanding the fiscal space as necessary. Sound coordination mechanisms across different policy areas and institutions for coherent approaches to promote decent work in the care economy are also necessary.

### 5.1. The way forward

168. Given its leadership in promoting coherent and integrated approaches to policy development related to the care economy, the ILO is well placed to continue and further develop its comprehensive work on the care economy across its strategic objectives, position its work in the care economy to respond to emerging challenges, and work with constituents to further enhance understanding of the care economy, which will involve promoting recognition of the importance of the care economy to decent work and social justice.

169. Promoting a common understanding of the care economy and its composition, including how to measure its size, is crucial for evidence-based policy for decent work in the care economy. The ILO could promote such a common understanding, including through a process beginning in 2024 to develop internationally agreed statistical standards on the topic. This will guide the collection and compilation of detailed, comparable and harmonized data addressing the extensive data gaps that currently exist.

170. The key components and characteristics of progressive care policy packages are proposed in the 5R Framework for Decent Care Work. To respond to requests from countries for support, the ILO could commit to ensuring that policy advice continues to respond to country situations, supporting policy implementation through strengthened coordination mechanisms and social dialogue, and building strong partnerships at the national and global levels to advance its work.

171. The ILO's Global Coalition for Social Justice could serve as a platform for further strengthening partnerships with UN agencies, international financial institutions, international networks and research centres, while also asserting the ILO's comparative advantage of its **tripartite structure** in promoting decent work in the care economy.

172. In this context, it is important to promote the ratification and implementation of international labour standards relevant to the care economy, including all ten fundamental Conventions.

173. Furthermore, data and statistical guidelines are critical to providing evidence-based policy advice. The ILO could promote the collection and compilation of comparable, harmonized data, and move towards the development of international guidelines on statistics concerning the care economy.

174. The ILO has the capability to: leverage its high-quality knowledge and further enhance its expertise on the care economy through strengthened research and analysis on trends in employment and decent work in the care economy; support constituents in estimating care needs and coverage gaps (including care leave policies) and in estimating returns on investments aimed at closing those gaps by mainstreaming care within macroeconomic policies; review financing mechanisms and public expenditure in the care economy; initiate an improved understanding of

#### 171 Definition

Tripartite structure means the collaboration between three groups: governments, employers, and workers organization. In the care economy, the partnership with each party is essential for promoting decent work.

productivity in the care economy; and undertake quantitative and qualitative analyses of policy impacts in promoting decent work in the care economy.

**175.** Moreover, the ILO could conduct research to enable the Organization to assess whether there are any gaps in the ILO's body of international labour standards in respect of paternity and parental protection, and if so, appropriate normative and non-normative actions that could be taken.

**176.** Furthermore, the ILO could continue to: provide policy and legal advisory services (including legal and policy reviews); offer capacity-building and services related to developing the fiscal, regulatory and technical capacities needed to design, finance and implement inclusive policies for the care economy, including on care policies, services and investments; support the mainstreaming of care in different policy areas; and promote social dialogue in the care economy, including through Decent Work Country Programmes.

**177.** To promote improved employment and working conditions in the care economy, the ILO could support the development of skills and accreditation programmes tailored to national contexts, with the aim of fostering the professionalization and formalization of care workers.

**178.** The ILO could further integrate issues relevant to the promotion of decent work and gender equality in the care economy into all relevant ILO development cooperation projects and activities – particularly those focused on women's employment and economic empowerment, the extension of labour and social protection, the elimination of discrimination, and the transition to the formal economy – to fully harness the care economy's potential to contribute to the Decent Work Agenda and the SDGs.

**179.** Enhancing collaboration with the International Training Centre could expand the Office's capacity-development strategy on the care economy, including by upscaling the accessibility of existing training courses and developing more that cater to the needs of ILO constituents and Member States in promoting decent work and gender equality in the care economy.

## 175 Interesting Facts

If Member States were to agree that weapons should not be placed in outer space, verification of compliance with this rule would depend on how space weapons are defined. There are several key difficulties in getting Member States to agree on a definition of a space weapon:

1. Dual-use technologies - Many satellites and space systems can serve both civilian and military purposes. For example, a satellite used for Earth observation or communications could also be used for military intelligence or targeting. Countries disagree on whether these should count as weapons.
2. Ground-based vs. space-based systems - Some countries, like the U.S., focus on limiting space-based weapons but maintain ground-based anti-satellite (ASAT) systems. Others, like Russia and China, emphasize banning ground-based systems too. This creates disagreement over which systems fall under the definition.
3. Types of threats - There are different ways to interfere with space assets: kinetic attacks, jamming, cyberattacks, or directed energy. States disagree about which of these constitute a "weapon."
4. Strategic interests - Each country wants rules that protect its own strengths while limiting others. Advanced space powers may prefer a narrow definition to preserve freedom of action, while countries with more ground-based capabilities may push for a broader definition.
5. Verification challenges - Without a definition of a space weapon that all countries agree on, verification of compliance with rules on the use of these weapons would be impossible or at the very least would lead to disputes on how to interpret the rules.