

INTERNATIONAL  
**YOUTH**  
THINK TANK

---

*Policy Brief*  
*December 2023*

# **Unpaid Care: Revaluing Women's Undervalued Labour**

Alina Arslanova, Sara Maria Barbaglia, Nathan Collins, Joe Earnshaw, Ben Galbraith,  
Ollie Gee, James Mottram, Victoria Portnaia, Anita Sammarini, Franklin Vaci, and  
Jonathan Ziener

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Care work is the bedrock of society. It is a testament to a shared humanity, and our collective responsibility towards one another. The significance of care work, both paid and unpaid, has become increasingly evident. As the world grapples with an ageing population, as well as the rise of hybrid work models catalysed by Covid-19 and AI, the urgency to address the issue of care work intensifies, and changing demographics, the burden of care work appears to be increasing.

Women bear the brunt of expectations to carry out care work, such as raising children and tending to elderly relatives and neighbours. Valuing care work translates to valuing women. Restructuring our understanding of care work as one that is sustainable will pave the way for a more equitable and compassionate future. This policy brief proposes a multifaceted approach to alleviate the burden of caregivers, including: greater investment in social services, the unionisation of care workers, fairer remuneration of unpaid labour, the reformation of the working day, and the establishment of public education campaigns. The ultimate goal is to create an economic model that truly values care work, ensuring equity and justice for all. Care work is not just work; it is the very essence of who humans are.

*To undervalue care is to undervalue humanity itself.*

## PROBLEM DEFINITION

Women often bear the brunt of simultaneous unpaid domestic responsibilities and paid employment. This double-burden, deeply rooted in historical and cultural gender role constructions, has been repeatedly outlined by global studies, which clearly demonstrate that women undertake disproportionately more unpaid care work. This imbalance not only underscores the gendered nature of care but also highlights the need for systemic change.

Care work is essential for societal well-being, yet our current economic model fails to recognise and remunerate this vital contribution and maintains a central hypocrisy: the moral reverence associated with unpaid care, particularly for roles like motherhood, often overshadows the economic remuneration of such work. Every measure used to describe the economy is anchored in economic income or output: GDP sees only economic output whilst GNI measures only income. This gap between moral appreciation and economic valuation is a stark motivation for the need for policy intervention.

# 6 Solutions to Revalue Unpaid Care Work

## Invest

Governments should invest in social services, primarily family services, to erode the expectation that women must take on the duty of care and to broaden the understanding of the benefits of socialising care in the community. This would be a first step in addressing the 'double-burden' problem and tackling inequalities.

1

2

## Unionise

National trade unions should be set up to bring visibility, structured recognition and a voice to unpaid and underpaid care workers. Unions must be bottom-up, democratically organised and member-led to give representation and influence to a highly marginalised group.

3

## Pay

Unpaid care workers must be fairly compensated. No worker deserves to work long hours and still find themselves to be reliant on supplementary employment for sustenance. Providing compensation for work that is commonly ignored within the adopted economic paradigm will address inequality, and help people change their opinions on how societal contribution is valued.

4

## Regulate

Revaluing unpaid care work requires an element of state and collective support. Regulation on working conditions must be introduced to create norms that improve the working conditions of currently unpaid care work.

5

## Improve

The expansion of both paternal and maternal leave would impact the quality of care for children. Increasing flexibility in working hours allows parents to spend more time with children and elderly relatives.

6

## Educate

Informing and educating citizens from a young age, both within and outside of schools, would help address the undervaluation of care work and gender inequalities from early on. This will fundamentally allow for a concrete foundation through which we can strive towards greater equality.

# SUPPORTING DATA & EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The visible economy of capital accumulation, GDP and growth that is the focus of many economies relies upon a foundation that is often ignored: unpaid, gendered care work. This invisible foundation underpins the patriarchal, growth-oriented system that we aim to transform.

In 2023, Claudia Goldin won the Nobel Prize in economics for her historical analysis of gender-pay gaps, and is the first woman to independently win this award. Her work is revolutionary and bodes well for greater recognition of women's troubles. However, the continued lack of attention on the unpaid labour of women in particular, and the socio-economic consequences of this, demonstrates that this problem is not just ignored politically but also academically.

For this reason, the seven specific-but-interlinked proposals in this policy brief seek to revalue unpaid care work socially, politically and academically. These proposals are based on the following contributions: The International Youth Conference 2022; the IYTT Working Paper No.4: 'Towards a New Economic Model Valuing Women and Natural Resources: Decomposing Orthodox Economics by De-Growth and Feminist Economic Theory' by IYTT Youth Fellow, Anita Sammarini; and the IYTT Youth Panel Results carried out by us.

## WHAT IS CARE WORK?

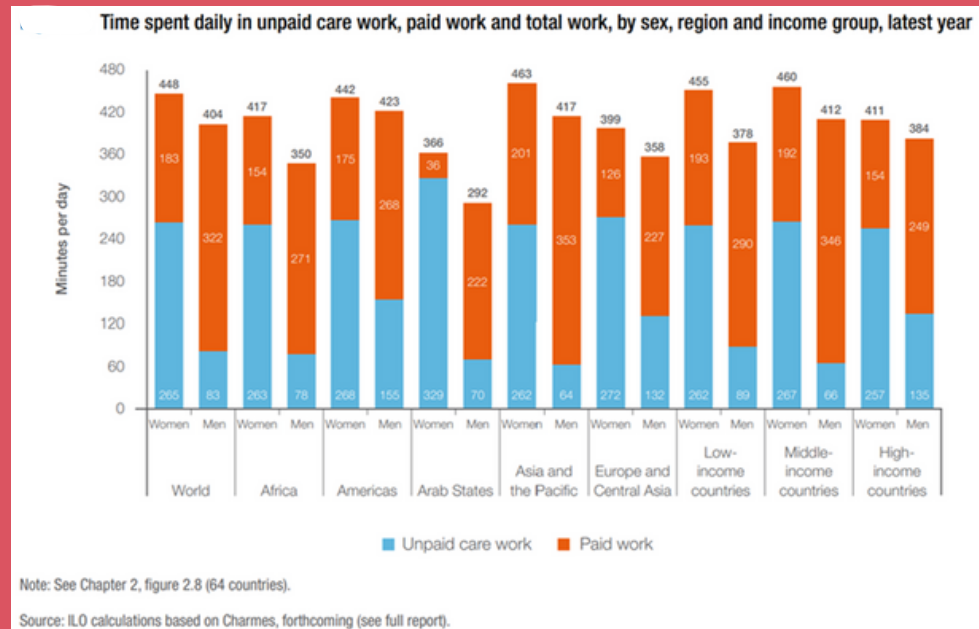
Care work can be defined as a sub-category of work that encompasses all tasks involving care processes in the service of others. The assumption that those who engage in unpaid care work are driven purely by moral responsibility, meaning that seeing the engagement of carers as being solely out of morality, is reductionist. There is an enormous variety of factors that play into why people undertake this kind of work. Most obviously is the fact that this kind of work is necessary. The [1999 United Nations Human Development Report](#) outlined how, without proper care and nurturing, children struggle to develop into high-functioning adults, struggling to maintain their overall mental health and wellbeing. This is not to mention healthcare-based unpaid care work, which is often essential within the overall medical process when looking after those with limited capabilities.

# SUPPORTING DATA & EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

## INVOLVEMENT

In the global context, as shown in Figure 1, unpaid care work is overwhelmingly undertaken by women. It is important to note that higher-income countries show slightly more male involvement in this domain, whilst elderly individuals have a key role in providing emotional support and assistance for families. Children may also contribute to care by supporting younger siblings or offering companionship to the elderly.

*The “double-burden” refers to women's simultaneous responsibility for unpaid domestic or caregiving labour, and is often linked to the unequal distribution of care work.*



## YOUTH PANEL

Around 91% of our youth-based panel clarified their belief that some people do more unpaid work than others due to deeply ingrained gender norms, whilst panellists underline that, in some cases, unpaid work is even more difficult to bear either due to financial difficulties or disabilities within the family. Given that 58% of panellists consider the greater burden of care to threaten democratic rights, with the underpayment and associated stresses tied to unpaid care, this demonstrates a tendency within young people to value one's ability to have representation. To the question 'Should unpaid care workers have a national representative body?', our panellists emphasised the need for self-representation of unpaid workers so that "their views can be presented to governing bodies".

The lack of political progress on the issue is symptomatic of the domination of men in politics. Male politicians have demonstrated repeatedly that they are unable or unwilling to recognise or appreciate how policies affect women. Male politicians lacking the empathy to accept and encourage changes that do not have a personal effect has been strikingly obvious. Most panellists agreed that the unfair distribution of unpaid care work was a problem. This demonstrates how important this issue is to young people and how well received the 6 proposals in this policy brief would be.

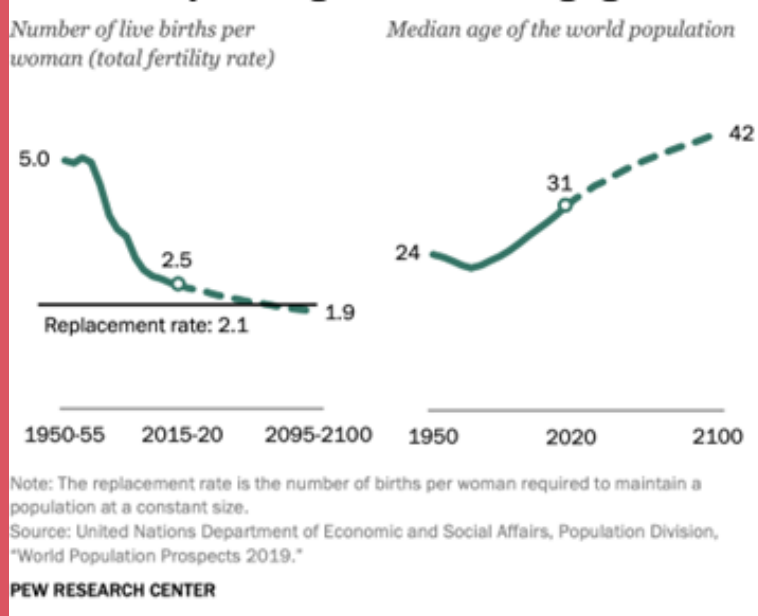
# SUPPORTING DATA & EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

## HOW MODERN CHANGES CHANGE CARE WORK: THREATS

One of the primary impacts of modern changes on caring for women is the ever increasing proportion of elderly people, and the attribution of care of the elderly to women within the current system. At present, with current demographic trends, it is expected that the population of the world globally will increase by 2 billion in the next 30 years. The impact will vary globally. In countries that will see drastic population increases (e.g., Nigeria), women's caregiving activities will be highly focussed on caring for children. In contexts of population decline, however (e.g., South Korea), the burden will be displaced towards supporting the elderly. Avoiding a clunky 'one-size-fits-all' mentality is, therefore, vital.

The nature of population changes, climate change and technological development means that, without structural changes, gender disparities in labour and the undervaluation of care work will continue to plague all societies.

### Global fertility is falling as the world is aging



One option is to expand the provision of paternal leave, which is still only provided in 63% of countries worldwide. Whilst this would have a positive, short-term impact on start-of-life care for children, the longer-term burden of care would likely continue to be placed upon women. Therefore, socialising care work is the important next step, such that various individuals of a community contribute to the care of the community as a whole. This reduces the individual burden of unpaid labour, but does not address the institutional need for more recognition of the burden of care on vulnerable groups.





Youth Fellows at the International Youth Conference 2023

## INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK

The IYTT: INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK is a think tank in which youth take the lead for democracy-strengthening activities with the aim to inspire decision-makers to democratic renewal and people to become more active citizens. Youth Fellows recruited via open calls for annual four-day conferences with 24 participants run the IYTT activities. To inspire decision-makers Youth Fellows develop democracy-renewing proposals that are published in a user-friendly democracy handbook, in reports, working papers, and in policy briefs. To inspire people to active citizenship Youth Fellows, take to the streets and engage in conversations with passers-by using a method they developed themselves called Open Chair Democracy Talks (OCDT). Since its inception in Athens in September 2021, Youth Fellows have conducted OCDT in over 50 locations and five continents. The IYTT's early international advance is shown by an article in The New York Times, in October 2022, and that applications for the fifth anniversary conference come from 540 youth from 68 countries.

### Contact

Urban Strandberg  
Managing Director / Co-Founder  
[urban.strandberg@lindholmen.se](mailto:urban.strandberg@lindholmen.se)  
[iythinktank.com](http://iythinktank.com)

INTERNATIONAL  
**YOUTH**  
THINK TANK