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## **Gender, care, and climate change: Why they are connected**

*Why does our society place so little value on care? The pandemic showed the centrality of health and care workers to daily life. But unpaid work – mainly done by women – does not figure as part of the calculations of the GDP of a country. Closely related to this is the scant value we place on the environment and preserving it for coming generations. Our economic models do not factor in essential, but unpaid work done by women, nor the critical task of protecting our fragile environment.*

We currently face two crises that highlight why we should value care better. The first, which has disrupted our lives and starkly exposed the inequalities within our country and across the globe, is Covid-19. Since this pandemic first emerged and spread across the world, it has become apparent that we have undervalued and underinvested in care. When the pandemic hit us, it became clear that we had too few people working in health services and related occupations. Further, with insufficient income support and almost 40% of the global population without access to adequate healthcare coverage, studies showed that care responsibilities in the household disproportionately fell on women compared with men during the global lockdown period.<sup>1</sup> The conditions of a pandemic also made clear that it is not the highly paid jobs in finance and banking that are essential for life, but the health and care workers, paid and unpaid, whose labour is critical for protecting lives and sustaining livelihoods in our society. There is a danger that, as we return to our lives outside of the pandemic, we will lose sight of this important lesson.

Why is it that society underinvests so dramatically in care services, exposing everyone to such high risk?<sup>2</sup> One of the main reasons that we undervalue care work is because it is naturalised as 'women's work', and largely done on an unpaid basis. This is most apparent when we consider how we measure the economy. The unpaid work that we do to care for ourselves, our parents, our children, and our community is not included in calculations on the value of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country. The GDP calculations that we use to calculate national output includes only work that is paid. The system that we use for these estimations requires that a price be placed on output that is counted in the GDP, and the argument that unpaid work has no price is used to exclude it from the estimation. In our view, this is a weak argument, since there are ways in which we can get a price for this work, even if it is unpaid.

<sup>1</sup> ILO, 2020; Kabeer, Razavi and van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021

<sup>2</sup> South Africa's difficult fiscal position puts formal care-work under risk of cuts too. See Sachs et al, SCIS Working Paper 30, 2022; <https://protect-za.mimecast.com/s/CcmICRgKx1f2InW1C9dF2v>

Feminists have long argued against narrow valuations of care in the economy and for the recognition of the important role that work typically performed by women plays in the reproduction of society and economies around the world.<sup>3</sup> Thus, feminist economics offers several alternative models to rethink economics, its core beliefs, theories, and policies. Its approach is that the centrality in economic theory on self-interest, scarcity, and competition, neglects women's interests and makes it difficult to redistribute power and well-being in society.<sup>4</sup> According to MacDonald (1995), a unifying theme in feminist work, therefore, is to challenge the distinctions made between the formal and informal economy; paid and unpaid work; market and non-market activities; as well as productive and reproductive labour.

We can get a good idea of the distribution of unpaid care work across the globe and its true value with time-use surveys. According to a [United Nations study](#), on average, across the world, women's allocation of time to unpaid care work is about three-fold that of men.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the work that women do in the informal economy to sustain livelihoods and build resilient economies is often invisible and undervalued. The ILO (2018) has found that 61% of the world's workers are found in the informal economy. Further, while there has been an increase in female labour-force participation globally, women are more likely to be in more vulnerable sectors of the informal economy, for example, as temporary/part-time workers, domestic workers, home-based workers, or as contributing family workers - usually unpaid.<sup>6</sup> Yet discussions about employment and economic output place little value on this work, partly because women disproportionately find work in the informal economy.

The second crisis we are dealing with is that posed by climate change. This too is about what we value. The problems of climate change are partly the result of us placing little or no value on caring for our natural environment. We have known for a long time that the burning of fossil fuels gives rise to greenhouse gases that damage our physical environment and that this will lead to rising temperatures, which will impose huge costs, especially on poor and marginalized communities.<sup>7</sup> Yet, across the world, but especially in the wealthiest countries, this lack of care for the environment continues unabated.

Our economic models are still based on growing the economy by 'exploiting' natural resources. However, certain ecological economists argue that an economy predicated on endless growth is ecologically unsustainable, because it places increasing pressure on resource consumption and environmental quality.<sup>8</sup> Further, measures such as GDP do not distinguish activities that improve social welfare from those that harm or have a negative impact on the health and well-being of society.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the reason for this lack of care for the environment is that corporations and individuals that benefit from these activities are able to reap the profits of these activities while passing the long-term costs of the damage to the environment onto others. We refer to this as negative externalities. In essence, the problem is that firms under-value caring for the environment and pass this cost on to all of society and to future generations.

Our understanding of the 'negative externalities' of air pollution and environmental destruction has improved, and we now understand the environmental and social costs of certain industries. However, understanding the impact is not the same as accounting for it. The negative externalities have increased the burden of care within households, which must manage the

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<sup>3</sup> Federici, 1975; Davis, 1981; Waring and Steinem, 1988, Mezzadri, 2020; Hassim, 2021

<sup>4</sup> Strober, 1994

<sup>5</sup> UN, 2017

<sup>6</sup> ILO, 2018

<sup>7</sup> IPCC, 2022

<sup>8</sup> Victor and Jackson, 2015

<sup>9</sup> Gianetti et al, 2014

impacts on health and access to resources for survival.

Studies show that the lack of care for the environment places a disproportionate burden on women. Due to inequalities in access to information, mobility, resources (such as land), and training, women are more vulnerable to climate disasters.<sup>10</sup> Pandemics such as Covid-19 are likely to occur more often due to loss of biodiversity and natural habitats. These place an additional burden on women. For example, using the NIDS CRAM data, Casale and Posel (2020) show that women spent about three hours more per day on childcare than men during the lockdown when schools and ECD Centres were closed.

Women's care responsibilities place them at the frontline of climate change impacts and adaptation practices. This is because women often bear responsibility for securing food, water, and fuel for the household. South Africa is already a water-scarce country, and certain areas are experiencing more erratic rainfall and prolonged drought due to climate change. This makes water access more difficult, which affects health, sanitation, and food security.<sup>11</sup> While women often do this work, it is also done by children and men depending on the context. Floods, such as those in Kwa-Zulu Natal earlier in 2022, also impact different groups unevenly, leaving black women, in particular, extremely vulnerable.<sup>12</sup>

The consequences of not valuing care are serious. In the case of unpaid work, the undervaluing of care places a disproportionate burden on women who do much of this work, because we don't include this care work in our GDP calculations and underinvest in these activities. Moreover, when governments cut social expenditure during times of economic crises, as our government is currently doing,<sup>13</sup> it is largely women's unpaid care work that fills the gaps. In other words, this unpaid work is equivalent to a tax that women pay to society.

We therefore need an economy that places care – for ourselves and our communities, and for our environment – at the centre. This requires us to develop a more gender-aware approach to the economy and to economic policies, which would fully value women's work and also fully cost the damage and harm that the exploitation of the physical environment causes for humans and all forms of life, both currently and for future generations. Making these costs visible will contribute to improved economic, social, and environmental policy. A good place to start would be to ensure that we recognise the deficiencies in our existing valuation systems and give proper value to work that is done disproportionately by women.

StatsSA is supposed to carry out time-use surveys every five years but the last was in 2010. It is time to increase the frequency of our time-use surveys that capture unpaid care work in order to inform policy.

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<sup>10</sup> UNEP, 2011

<sup>11</sup> UNWomen, 2022

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