

POLICY BRIEF

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Prioritising care, powering economies: A G20 agenda for inclusive growth and women's empowerment

Introduction

Care is central to human, social, economic, and environmental development, and essential for society to live, thrive, and grow. The care economy—spanning education, childcare, support for people with disabilities and elder care, domestic work, and health and other social services—is described by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as comprising paid and unpaid care work, direct and indirect care, its provision within and outside the household, the people who provide and receive care, and the employers and institutions offering care (ILO, 2024). The ILO's 5R Framework for Decent Care Work (Addati et al, 2018) in *Figure 1* provides a comprehensive perspective on care: to **recognise**, **reduce**, and **redistribute** unpaid

care work, **reward** paid care with decent work for care workers, and guarantee care workers' **representation**, social dialogue, and collective bargaining. This framework must be supported, paired with an approach grounded in human rights, equality, and non-discrimination, where care is seen both as a universal right and as a public good (United Nations [UN], 2024; UN Human Rights Council, 2025). Such an approach emphasises co-responsibility across society, with the State as the duty-bearer, and through this, care and support systems become more inclusive and resilient, particularly in the face of global challenges, such as climate change, humanitarian and economic crises, and pandemics.

The provision of care is currently distributed unequally along gender lines, with women providing the majority of paid and unpaid care work globally. Across G20 nations, women do twice as much unpaid care work compared to men (ILO, 2025), reflecting harmful and systemic gender norms, as well as the undervaluation of women's work. And yet, the care economy provides a significant opportunity for inclusive growth and is necessary to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1, 3, 5, 8, and 10.¹ Paid care work accounts for approximately 381 million jobs globally (Addati et al, 2018) and is expected to generate almost 300 million additional jobs by 2035 (ILO, 2022). Women make up about two-thirds of this workforce (ILO, & UN Women, 2021).

Developing a robust and inclusive care economy is a core requirement for an accessible and sustainable labour market. The G20 has acknowledged the care economy over the past decade, particularly in the context of the 2014 Brisbane Goal to reduce the gender labour force participation gap by 25% by 2025. However, progress has been slow, with only nine out of nineteen G20 nations reaching it, and more work is required to fully close gender gaps in every G20 country (Harris, 2025). To do so, the G20 must prioritise the care economy; this will advance gender equality and generate returns in job creation, labour force participation, productivity levels, human capital, and tax revenue, as well as reduce poverty and long-term social expenditure (World Economic Forum, 2024).

Research evidence

The care economy has the potential to unlock national economies and women's participation within them; however, to do so a **comprehensive, coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach is required to ensure inclusive, high-quality, and accessible care that addresses systemic inequalities**. To

enable this, policymakers need to leverage change within economic structures, social norms, and national policies—prioritising care as both an opportunity and enabler for inclusive growth, and as a core human right. This forms the basis of the 2025 Women20 (W20) recommendations for the G20 leaders.

1. Increase investments in care and support systems to 10% of national income by 2030

Policymakers should increase investment in comprehensive care and support systems to 10% of national income by 2030, integrating care into education, healthcare, and social services. This can be done by increasing public investment, optimising macroeconomic policy tools to mobilise fiscal resources and restructure debt, leveraging public-private models, and adopting innovative technological solutions. In alignment with targets endorsed by influential bodies, including UN Women (2022; 2025) and the Generation Equality Forum (Devidiscourse, 2025), this threshold needs to be met or exceeded to ensure universal coverage for all who require care, particularly the most vulnerable: children, persons with

disabilities, and older people.

By taking a systemic approach, the care needs of women and care recipients can be integrated into existing care and support services and infrastructure (both physical and social). This helps to redistribute care, ensuring that these societal needs do not disproportionately fall to women by default, particularly in times of crisis and fiscal austerity. Such comprehensive care systems place care at the centre of public policy, supported by care-enabling macroeconomic policies that create and expand fiscal space—from government spending, to taxation, to monetary policy (Sequino, 2025). Designing laws, budgets, and institutions around the

1. These goals are 1 (no poverty), 3 (good health and well-being), 5 (gender equality), 8 (decent work and economic growth, and 10 (reduced inequalities).

recognition that providing and receiving care is a shared social responsibility not only strengthens the accessibility and delivery of care but also helps attract greater private sector investment, and unlock additional financing for the sector.

Globally, there has been a shift towards comprehensive care and support systems, with Uruguay's National Care System serving as a pioneer (Salvador, 2019). Uruguay has embedded care as a right, creating dedicated governance and coordinated services—across childcare, elder care, care worker training,

and income supplements—which ensures that all policy decisions are assessed for their impact on those that provide and receive care and support. Other G20 countries have made progress through the design and implementation of national care policies, such as Brazil's proposed National Care Policy, Indonesia's 2025–2045 Roadmap on the Care Economy, and Mexico's 2024–2030 National Care System plan (ILO, 2025). These policies, when paired with adequate investments, support care's overall integration in society.

2. Reduce and redistribute the unpaid care work gap by 35% by 2035

Unpaid care work is a critical component of the care economy and is disproportionately undertaken by women and girls across society. This results in time poverty, creating structural barriers to women's participation, retention, and progression within the economy, as well as civil society, politics, and leadership. **The G20 should proactively implement solutions that reduce and redistribute this unpaid care work, with the aim of reducing the unpaid care gender gap by 35% by 2035.** This is a realistic, yet ambitious goal for G20 countries.

In 2023, 229 million women in G20 countries did not participate in the labour market due to unpaid care responsibilities—20 times more than the number of men (11 million) who reported being outside the labour force for the same reason (ILO, 2025). Africa is identified as the region with the most “unshared system of care,” and in South Africa specifically, 88.2% of the 2.4 million people outside the workforce due to household responsibilities are women (Valiani, 2022; Statistics South Africa, 2025). Factors such as climate change and humanitarian crises worsen the disproportionate care responsibilities experienced by women, as time spent on unpaid care multiplies and becomes more complex. This exacerbates existing socio-

economic inequalities, deepening poverty and inequality, particularly amongst women and girls.

A reduction in the unpaid care gap can be achieved through government policies, targeted incentives and awareness campaigns that address harmful social norms, and the promotion of shared responsibility in caregiving and domestic work. A deliberate strategy for each G20 country is to **reduce its childcare policy gap—the time between the end of paid parental leave and the start of public schooling—by 35% by 2035.** While five G20 countries currently have no childcare policy gap, across the rest of the G20, the average childcare policy gap is four years. Reducing this by an approximate 1.5 years over the next decade could achieve this target. This can be done through extended paid parental leave and/or the provision of additional years in free or low-cost, government-supported early childhood care and education. Furthermore, for every US dollar invested in closing this gap, GDP could increase by an average of \$3.76 dollars (ILO, 2023). This is in addition to the benefit of job creation in the care industry, bringing in more tax revenue and reducing the gender wage gap.

3. Recognise, measure, and evaluate care work through disaggregated data

Designing and implementing effective care policy solutions is hampered by a lack of disaggregated data, which makes the measurement of care work challenging (Empowerment of Women Working Group [EWWG], 2024). The systematic collection and analysis of comparable disaggregated data is critical to better **recognise, measure, and evaluate care work's contribution to GDP by women and value across society**, particularly for unpaid and informal work. This includes utilising national time-use surveys to more comprehensively calculate the distribution of care. Disaggregated time-use data substantiates the economic value for paid and unpaid care, contributes to better understanding and improving care delivery models, and informs new areas of the care economy. While the availability of time-use data has improved, with 74% of G20 countries publishing time-use data in the last decade, there remain challenges around data gaps (Harris, 2025). Surveys are time-intensive and expensive, and non-standardised collection methods make cross-country comparative analyses difficult (Charmes, 2021). However, some of these obstacles can be addressed by implementing regular data collection in line with the 2016 International Classification

of Activities for Time-Use Statistics (ICATUS, 2016), a standard framework developed by the UN Statistical Commission to categorise time-use data.

Integrating care into GDP calculations, such as through satellite accounts that provide more in-depth statistics on particular areas connected to national or regional accounts, can help recognise care's contributions to growth and development. Complementary, disaggregated, non-economic indicators are also essential to measure women's well-being and guide policy decisions. The United Kingdom produces a Household Satellite Account through its Office for National Statistics, which assigns a monetary value to unpaid care work alongside time-use data (Payne & Vassilev, 2018). Countries in the African Union have also made strides in incorporating unpaid care into national statistics; Kenya conducted its first time-use survey in 2021, using the data to inform gender equality policies and guide public services and infrastructure to support caregivers (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). These examples illustrate how G20 countries can combine economic measurement with complementary well-being indicators to more fully capture care's role in supporting inclusive growth and development.

4. Recognise, reward, and protect care workers

The precarity and undervaluation of paid work in the care economy further reinforces gender inequality. Whilst care work is demanding and may require high levels of skills and specialised knowledge, these skills are not often recognised and valued accordingly. Many care and domestic workers remain in the informal economy, earning below minimum wage and being excluded from social and labour protections, which perpetuates the gender wage gap, estimated at 15.4% across G20 countries in 2022/23 (ILO, 2025). Intentional action is required to address this, and although progress has varied by country, there is **renewed opportunity under the proposed**

Brisbane–eThekweni Goal to reduce the unadjusted gender wage gap by 15% by 2035, with the potential to increase the target to 35% following a 5-year review (South Africa DEL, 2025). This target is in line with the W20's proposed target of reducing the gender pay gap by 35% by 2025 (Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC], 2025).

There is also a need to **recognise, reward, and protect paid care workers—providing dignity and adequate compensation for their work**. This is especially critical for marginalised communities, such as rural women, migrant care workers, and those operating outside

formal employment structures, who already experience challenges within the labour market. To achieve this, international labour standards, such as ILO Conventions 190 (on violence in the world of work), 189 (on domestic workers as carers), and 149 (on nursing personnel), must be ratified and implemented. National policies must be adopted to upskill

and ensure fair employment, decent work, and inclusive social protection. Developing gender-responsive social protection systems will also assist in addressing the structural inequalities embedded in care work, improve women's economic security, and promote equitable care responsibilities.

Conclusion

Global momentum on the care economy continues to gain steam and legitimacy amongst G20 countries. In June 2025 at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, a commitment was made to increase investment in the care economy and recognise, value, and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work (UN, 2025). In July, G20 Labour and Employment Ministers re-affirmed their commitment towards reducing the labour force participation gap, with the proposed Brisbane–eThekweni Goal targeting a 25% decrease by 2030 (South Africa DEL, 2025). Most recently, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued an opinion in August that

care constitutes an autonomous human right—an important milestone towards the continued development of legislation and policies around care and support systems (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2025). These are promising developments, but more is needed to adequately target care as a systemic driver of gender and labour market inequality. With just five years until the SDG's deadline and key upcoming global moments, including the World Summit for Social Development and post-2030 agenda negotiations, G20 countries have a critical role to play in prioritising care as a strategic lever for inclusive economic growth and sustainable development.

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Graphics

Figure 1: The 5R Framework for Decent Care Work

MAIN POLICY AREAS	POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	POLICY MEASURES
Care policies	Recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measure all forms of care work and take unpaid care work into account in decision-making Invest in quality care services, care policies and care-relevant infrastructure Promote active labour market policies that support the attachment, reintegration and progress of unpaid carers into the labour force
Macroeconomic policies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enact and implement family-friendly working arrangements for all workers Promote information and education for more gender-equal households, workplaces and societies
Social protection policies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guarantee the right to universal access to quality care services Ensure care-friendly and gender-responsive social protection systems, including floors Implement gender-responsive and publicly funded leave policies for all women and men
Labour policies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regulate and implement decent terms and conditions of employment and achieve equal pay for work of equal value for all care workers Ensure a safe, attractive and stimulating work environment for both women and men care workers Enact laws and implement measures to protect migrant care workers
Migration policies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life Promote freedom of association for care workers and employers Promote social dialogue and strengthen the right to collective bargaining in care sectors Promote the building of alliances between trade unions representing care workers and civil society organizations representing care recipients and unpaid carers

Source: Addati et al, 2018

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