
Rethinking Economic Justice: Centering Unpaid Labor for Gender Equality

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What is Economic Justice?

There are many definitions
from philosophical to
practical

WHAT IS YOURS?

AI Definition

Feminist definitions of economic justice emphasize a just and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, recognizing the importance of both paid and unpaid labor, and addressing the systemic inequalities that disadvantage women and other marginalized groups.

Core Principles



- **Beyond Market-Oriented Definitions:**
Feminist economic justice goes beyond traditional notions of economic empowerment, which often focus solely on market participation and financial independence.
- **Recognizing Unpaid Labor:**
It acknowledges and values the crucial role of unpaid labor, such as childcare, housework, and caregiving, which are often undervalued or ignored in mainstream economic discourse.
- **Addressing Systemic Inequalities:**
It seeks to dismantle the structures that perpetuate gender inequality and other forms of oppression, such as unequal pay, lack of access to resources, and discriminatory policies.
- **Intersectional Approach:**
Feminist economic justice recognizes that various forms of oppression intersect, and that marginalized groups experience unique challenges.
- **Focus on Well-being:**
It prioritizes the well-being of all people, not just economic growth, and emphasizes the importance of social, political, and environmental justice.
- **Empowerment and Control:**
It aims to empower individuals and communities to have greater control over their own lives and economic resources.

Centering Unpaid Labor

- Subsistence production: production for home use of goods which in principle could be marketed (food, clothing, pottery).
- Reproductive work: managing a household (cooking, cleaning, fetching fuel and water, etc.)
- Volunteer or community work: unpaid activity in all kinds of civic associations, both secular and religious

- Unpaid work does not receive any direct remuneration, so not recognized as important
- It usually requires a low level of skills and productivity
- It usually is repetitive, boring and tedious
- Unpaid workers have poor chances of upward mobility
- It is a 24-hour job, but no retirement, no benefits, and no cash, savings or assets
- Unpaid workers have poor exposure to outside world, poor confidence, low human capital

A subset of Unpaid Labor is Care Labor- But with some nuances

Care is the provision of services to those who are not able to do things or care for themselves; it is work and it involves labor

Care work is often considered as referring to activities that involve “looking after” someone else in a variety of ways, that is, all the activities and relations involved in meeting the needs – physical, psychological, and emotional of dependent adults and children (**direct care**)

Health adults also need care in the form of cooking, washing clothes, gathering water and fuel, cleaning house, etc. (**indirect care**)

Infrastructure (piped water, electricity, technology, capital goods (washing machines) can relieve the indirect care burden

Measurement of Unpaid Work and Care: Time Use Surveys

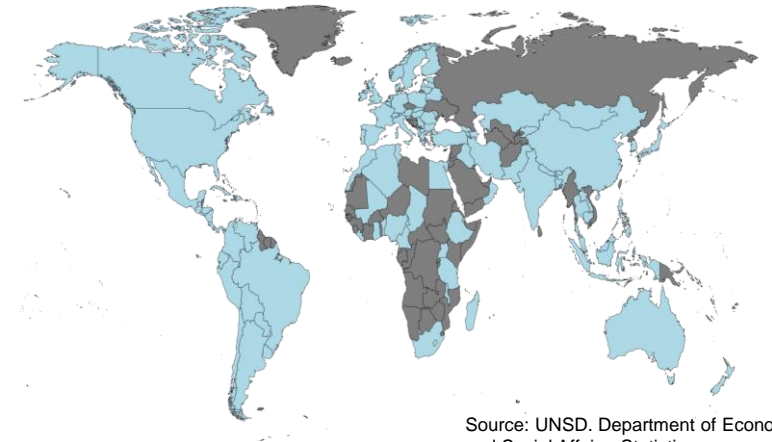
Time-use data help measure not only paid work but also **unpaid care work**, domestic chores, volunteering, education, leisure, and self-care.

These surveys capture work beyond the formal economy, making visible what traditional economic systems ignore

According to the United Nations Statistics Dept, 106 countries have at least one time use survey

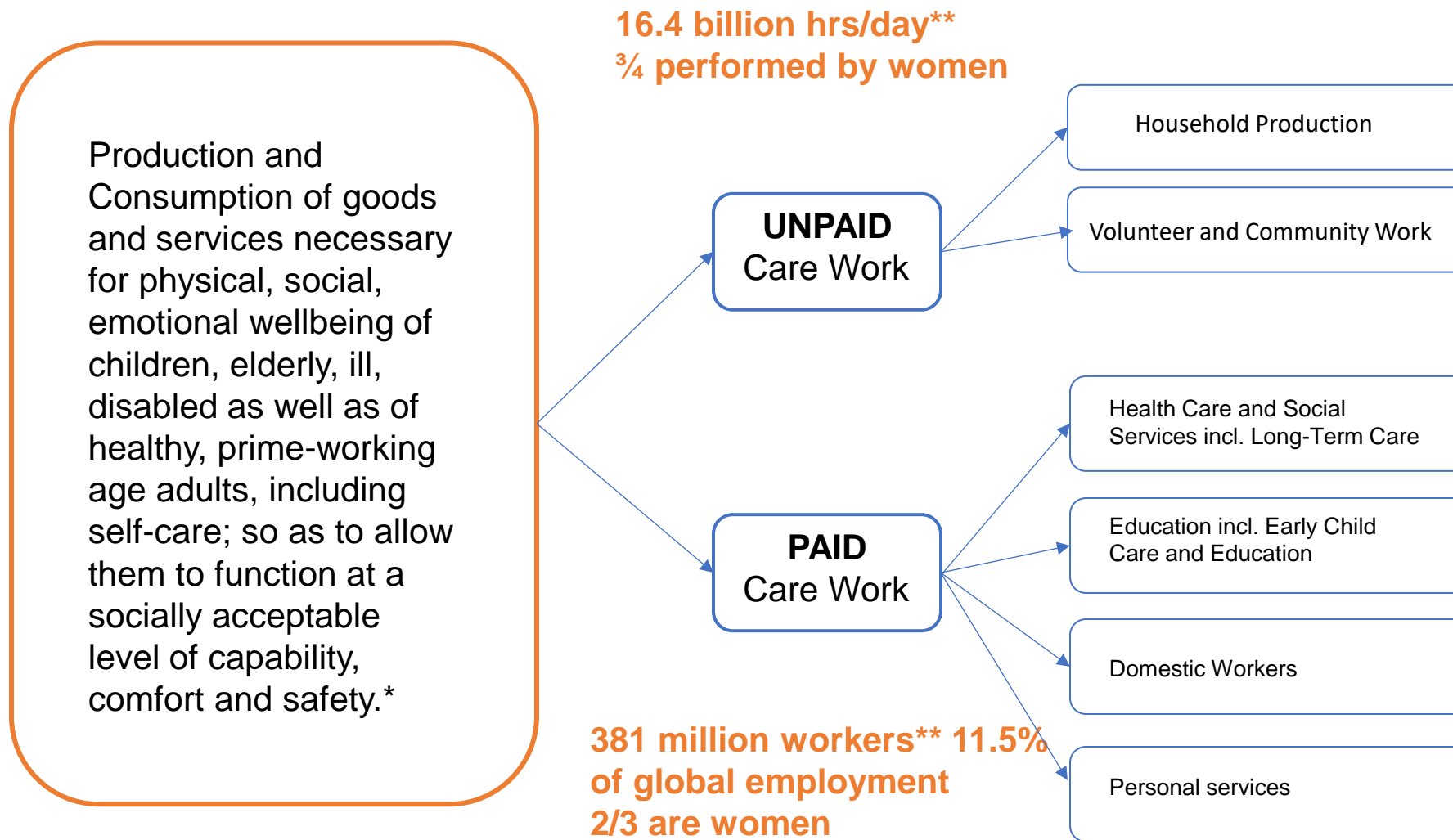
Time-use statistics examine disparities in how time is utilized and allocated - **Time poverty**.

Time poverty should be understood in combination with income poverty. Women who are both time and income poor are overworked.



Source: UNSD. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Statistics.

Magnitude of the Care Economy




Source: Ilkcaracan 2021. A Guide to Public Investment in the Care Economy

*Himmelweit 2007; ** ILO 2018


Care provisioning provides externalities and should be considered as a public good.

- Care work impacts the economy and affects labor force participation (especially women) and economic growth
- Care deficits can lead to lower life expectancy, chronic illness and poor quality of life
- Decline in fertility rates below replacement levels is a concern for the reproduction of societies
- In that sense, care services (for children, those with illness and disabilities, the elderly and others) are **public goods and their provisioning is the responsibility of society as a whole.**

Investing in care has economic returns




A review of 22 studies from low- and middle-income economies across Latin America and the Caribbean, East and South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa shows that increasing access and reducing the cost of care can improve maternal labor market outcomes, including employment, hours worked, income, productivity, and job type (Halim et al., 2021).




Another study highlights job creation potential of childcare in 82 economies representing 87 per cent of the world's employed population and 94 per cent of the world GDP (De Henau, 2022): job creation potential by 2035 would be driven by 96 million direct jobs in childcare, 136 million direct jobs in long-term care, and 67 million indirect jobs in non-care sectors. About 1.5 per cent of global GDP (without considering the influx of taxes resulting from increased formal employment) would be required to provide universal childcare of high-quality, over and above the current public spending of 0.3 per cent of global GDP.


Care as a Public Good is Underfinanced



Financing for childcare is low in LMICs; on average, LMIC countries spend 0.08 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on pre-primary education, around 25 percent of the estimated need to provide universal pre-primary education in line with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets (Samman & Lombardi, 2019).



2019 data for the Group of Seven (G7) countries indicates that only 0.7 percent (\$172 million) of ODA went to early childhood education (ECE) (O'Donnell et al., 2021)

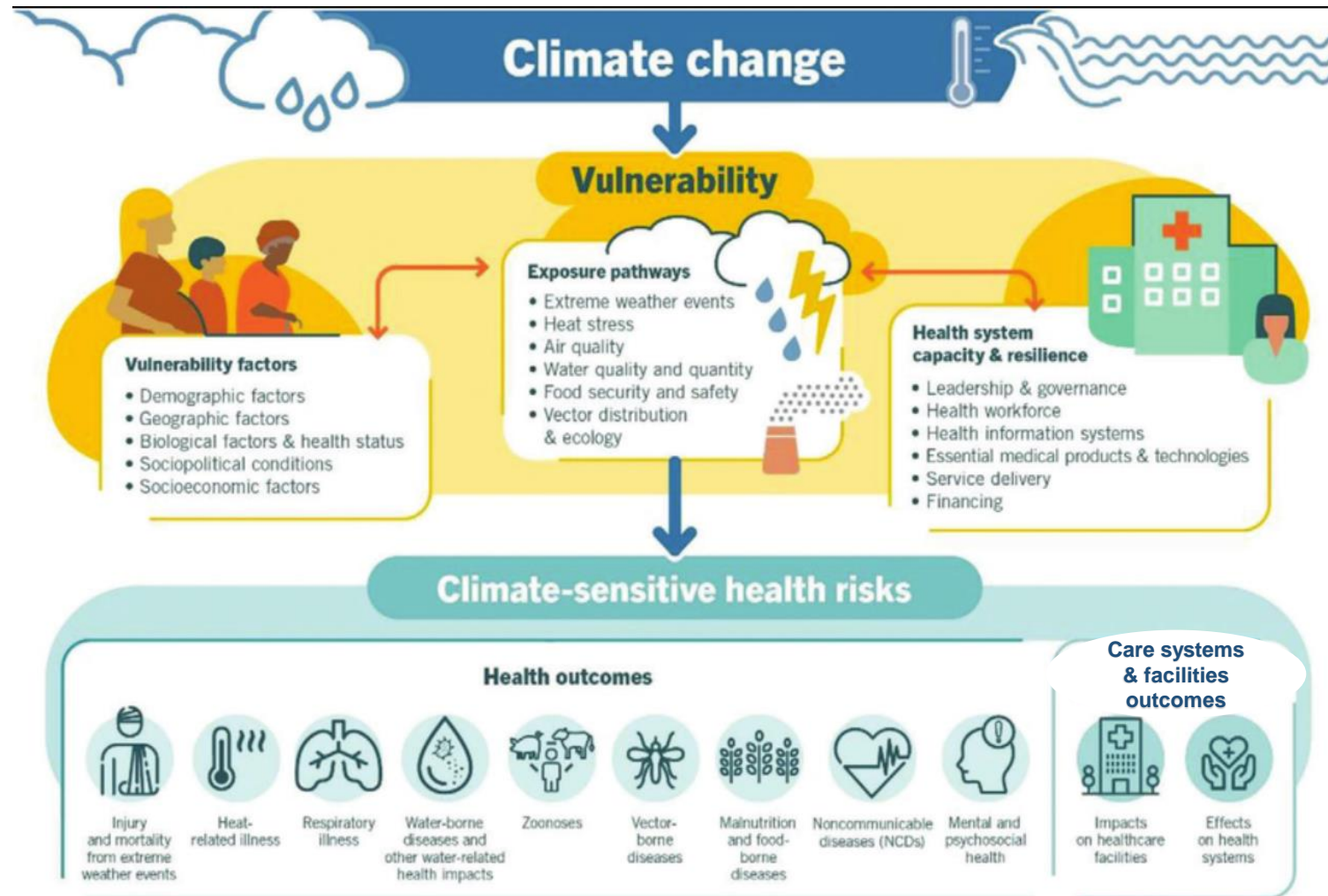


Financing for long term care for the elderly is very low in many LMICs. For Africa, the Arab States, and lower-income Asian countries, LTC financing is close to zero (De Henau, 2022)

The demand for care increases in the context of climate change



Climate change and the need for care



Modified from original graph source: WHO 2021. Climate Change and Health. [Climate change \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/publications-detail/11-years-on-climate-change-and-health)

Climate change impact on demand for care



Photo: Catherine Falls Commercial/Getty Images.
[Cochrane Sustainable Healthcare: evidence for action on too much medicine](#) | [Cochrane Library](#)

- Water shortage and lack of fuel resources -- ↑ time spent in gathering water and fuel
- Increase in illnesses and communicable diseases including dengue, malaria, cholera, etc. -- ↑ need for sickcare.
- Increase in injuries -- ↑ disabled care
- Damage on health care facilities, long- term care and child care services, school, etc. -- ↑ childcare, eldercare, sickcare, etc. provided by HHs.

Climate Change Impact on Supply of Caregivers

- Migration: Both domestic and international and climate-related migration have increased, leading to disruptions and reorganization of care arrangements within families and extended kin/community networks.
 - May increase care labor of other family members, e.g., girls and boys may end up withdrawing from school
- Men may become caregivers?
- Climate-related morbidity and mortality may affect both availability and quality of care, e.g., through increased stress, or intrafamilial and social conflict.

Care is conceived as a public good, care is a sector for public Investment

If we accept the argument that care services are public goods and their provisioning is the responsibility of society as a whole, it needs public finance

However, care services are undersupplied:

Unmet demand for such childcare is substantial, with more than 40 percent of children younger than primary school age—350 million children globally—needing childcare and not having access to it (Devercelli and Beaton-Day 2020)

Supply of eldercare services is hard to measure across countries due to data limitations but one study of elder care in 10 (mostly) high income countries shows that it is largely informal, provided by families or unpaid caregivers (largely women).






Care is conceived as a public good, care is a sector for public Investment, cont

- No country has a system of resilient care services/infrastructure
- But we can change this:
 - We can map demand for care and supply of care services using Census and GIS data
 - We can develop methodologies to estimate the costs of a universal care system (see also the ILO Care-Cost Simulator)
 - We can incorporate care cost estimates in domestic, development and climate adaptation finance

Centering care for economic justice



The policy framework for *a resilient, caring and equal* economy would entail:

-  Government public investment in quality care for ALL
-  Redistribution of care work:
 - between households and public provisioning
 - between women and men
-  Incentives for men to increase their unpaid care work, their commitment to caring norms, and their ability to have care careers;
-  Addressing the needs and rights of care givers and receivers with autonomy, choice, agency and dignity
-  A coordinated approach to building transformative care systems

BROOKINGS