



Make
Mothers
Matter

W20 - HKSWN Care Economy Event

**Women as Carers, Workers and Changemakers:
Challenges & Opportunities at the Intersection of the Care
Economy, Early Childhood and the Future of Work**

Global perspective of mothers around the world and their contribution to global development

'Women bring various powers to the table. One is the power of the purse [...] Second, they bring the power of life. I think that actually giving birth gives you a sense of prosperity, heritage, transmission, that is quite special. I know it's going to be controversial but I think maternity is central to making sure that our children inherit something that is sustainable, that they can live in, live with, and transmit to other generations.'

Christine Lagarde, President of the European Central Bank¹

Giving a global perspective on mothers around the globe is challenging. First because there is no statistical definition of a mother, so there are very few statistics on mothers. And second because their situation is extremely diverse, depending on their country, whether they live in an urban or rural environment, their social and cultural context, their level of education, their race or ethnicity, the number and age of their children... and the list goes on.

What we know though is that:

1. Mothers all over the world are in most cases the primary carers of their children
2. Globally women do ¾ of the unpaid domestic and care work, a figure which is likely to be much higher for mothers – and which is a barrier to their full participation in other spheres of life, like employment or politics
3. Mothers are discriminated against because of maternity – the so-called 'motherhood penalty'
4. And as a result of all this, mothers are more likely to be poor than men or women without children, that there IS a **motherhood** wage gap, and that the pension gaps are higher for mothers and increase with the number of children...

At the same time, we must not portray mothers as victims. Mothers also have a lot in Common. As Christine Lagarde says, they have the power of life - and this translates into a strong motivation to build a better world for their children, and ensure that they have a better life. This means that when adequately recognized, educated and supported, mothers can be a powerful force for good – changemakers!

If we consider the UN 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs, we at MMM are convinced that empowering mothers as essential partners can have wide ranging positive impacts for its achievement.

¹ in a November 2020 New York Times interview

To empower mothers and harness their untapped potential, the enabler SDG is SDG5 on Gender Equality, in particular target 5.4 on recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work.

This target is also the focus of our advocacy work at MMM.

But unfortunately, it is among the most off-track. [Only 92 out of 193 UN Member States have conducted at least one Time-Use Survey to measure unpaid care work and make it visible...]

So, what do we need to empower mothers? In our advocacy, we first call for:

1. Care to be recognized as work, valuable work, which benefits everyone and is worth supporting, and which develop skills – life skills in particular
2. investments in supporting mothers and their families, through adequate public infrastructure, health services, social protection, education - including parenting education
3. a redistribution of unpaid domestic and care work and responsibilities more equitably, so that mothers can also take on their other roles in society and the economy without being discriminated against and penalized

Redistribution is absolutely key - first between men and women, but also across society, with every stakeholder – families, communities, governments and the private sector - taking their share of the work, responsibility and cost. Involving fathers right from the start, is quadruple win for children, mothers, fathers themselves, and ultimately for society.

The so-called ‘3Rs framework’ – Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute – is a useful advocacy tool as it provides concrete avenues on which policymakers can act to improve the situation.

However, with this approach we are only patching our current economic and social systems, which are still based on now obsolete assumptions - namely the male breadwinner model). Women – mothers in particular - have tried hard to adapt, often to the detriment of their health and wellbeing, juggling care work and responsibilities with their other lives. This logic MUST be reversed: it is our systems that must be adapted – or even transformed - to the realities of care needs and women’s lives.

We at MMM are convinced that we need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. And this leads us to consider 2 additional ‘Rs’: Re-invent and Rights.

1. Re-invent is about the economy: our current economic system is driven by an obsession with GDP growth and short-termism - it completely ignores unpaid care work – and the necessary long-term investment in Early childhood, and considers this work as an unlimited and free resource. Back in 2008, the economist Nancy Folbre pointed out that “not all the inputs and outputs come with price tags attached. Somewhere along the way, babies are conceived, nurtured, educated, and launched into adulthood in a process that requires considerable time and effort as well as money.”²

We do need to Re-invent our economy so that it prioritizes the well-being of all people and the planet, in a just and sustainable manner – with the work of caring for each other and for the planet being recognized, valued, and adequately supported.

This is the reason behind our membership to the Wellbeing Economy Alliance.

2. ‘R’ for Right means Everyone should have the Right to Care and to be cared for, in a supported, dignified way, with all the costs and benefits equitably shared across society.

² in «Valuing children. Rethinking the Economics of the Family » published at Harvard University Press

Establishing such a right would assert the value of Care to society. It would also put obligations on governments to address the issue and to provide adequate support to every unpaid caregiver. In turn, this would also protect the rights of any person in need of Care, in particular children, who have no voice and whose survival and healthy development really depends on nurturing care.

To conclude and end on a positive note, a recent positive development shows that the issue of care has gained traction at the international level: a resolution was adopted last July by the UN General Assembly, which establish an international Day for Care and Support – and this new international day will be on 29 October. Let's use this opportunity to strengthen our advocacy!