



**Written Statement**  
**2024 High Level Political Forum**  
**Reinforcing the 2030 Agenda and eradicating poverty in**  
**times of multiple crises: the effective delivery of**  
**sustainable, resilient and innovative solutions**

### **Addressing crises through the Care lens**

The multiple and mutually reinforcing crises that the world faces today not only jeopardize the realisation of the 2030 agenda, but threaten the future of humanity: the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic, the rising number of conflicts and humanitarian crises, the energy and food security crises triggered by the Ukraine war, inflation, the debt crisis, the ageing of the population and looming care crisis, the climate emergency and other environmental crises – all have set back progress on many fronts, in particular poverty.

Generally, crisis-related hardships combine and compound pre-existing disadvantages; they exacerbate inequalities. But all these crises also have a common thread: a disproportionate negative impact on women, undermining progress on women's rights. In particular, most of them directly or indirectly increase the time and energy women spend on unpaid domestic and care work, its unequal distribution at the root of gender inequalities.

#### *How do crises affect women's unpaid care work?*

The pattern is more or less always the same: in times of crisis, women act as a shock absorber. Through their unpaid care and domestic work, they compensate for disruptions in the provision of public services (e.g. health, schools, water...) and resource availability (e.g. income, social benefit, food...) - a fact which remains generally ignored when addressing these crises.

The links between climate change and unpaid care work are now recognized<sup>1</sup>. There are multiple ways in which climate change increases the unpaid workload. For example, climate change induced desertification forces women to walk longer distances to fetch water and collect firewood. Climate change also negatively impacts health, in particular children's and older persons' health, increasing care needs, with again women taking the slack. Climate change particularly impacts rural women, as it complicates farming, including subsistence farming, reduces productivity and forces them to adapt to new crops or livestock.

Similarly, the disproportionate impact that the debt crisis has on women is well documented. The direct consequence is austerity, as governments spend more on servicing debts than on essential public services like health and education. Women compensate the cuts to social benefits and public infrastructures and services by additional unpaid work.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: The climate-care nexus: addressing the linkages between climate change and women's and girls' unpaid care domestic and communal work; working paper, UN Women, 2023 – available at <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/working-paper-the-climate-care-nexus-en.pdf>

The impact of inflation is similar albeit less discussed: because of rising costs, women cut on expenses for goods and services that they compensate through cheaper but time-consuming alternatives (e.g. in the areas of transportation, food provision and processing, domestic work, etc.).

Conflicts and disasters also affect women and men differently, increasing women's overall workload and care responsibilities as infrastructure and services collapse.

### *Why it matters*

Globally, women do 3.2 times more unpaid domestic and care work than men<sup>2</sup>. Feminists have long denounced this inequitable distribution of unpaid family care work – or *Care gap* – as being a major barrier for women to access education and paid work and participate in public life, a root cause of economic and social injustice for women – in particular when they are mothers, and the main obstacle to gender equality.

According to a 2019 UNDP Report<sup>3</sup>, accelerating gender equality in all spheres of society would speed up progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. Gender equality is also key to prevent and address crises. But this will not happen as long as the issue of the inequitable distribution of unpaid domestic and care work remains unaddressed – especially in times of crises when this imbalance tends to increase.

From a gender equality and women's empowerment perspective, addressing this issue of women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work is therefore all the more important in times of crises.

In particular, as already highlighted, unpaid care work often compensates for the lack of basic public infrastructure, including water and sanitation, electricity and other sources of energy, ICT, transportation, and the lack of essential public services like healthcare, education and care services. Ensuring accessible and affordable public infrastructure and services must therefore be a top priority for governments – especially in times of crises. Governments must also ensure women's participation in the development of these public infrastructures, so that they best serve their needs and reduce time-consuming and tedious domestic work. Investing in time- and labour-saving technologies like washing machines is also key.

In turn, gender equality and women's empowerment can generate peace and resilience dividends: women often make significant contributions to peacebuilding and the strengthening of social cohesion, as well as enhancing community resilience to disasters and climate change<sup>4</sup>.

*Could having a 'care lens' in addressing crises mitigate their effect or even contribute to the solution?*

The '3Rs' framework (Recognize-Reduce-Redistribute), which is widely used to formulate care policies, is undoubtedly useful as it provides concrete avenues on which policy makers can act. But basically, we are only patching our current economic and social systems, which are still based on patriarchal and now obsolete assumptions (in particular the male breadwinner model). Women have tried hard to adapt, often to the detriment of their health, juggling to reconcile care work and

<sup>2</sup> ILO Working Paper 'The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market.', Jacques Charmes, ILO, 2019 – Accessible on [https://www.ilo.org/gender/Informationresources/Publications/WCMS\\_732791/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/gender/Informationresources/Publications/WCMS_732791/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>3</sup> *Gender Equality as an Accelerator for Achieving the SDGs*; UNDP, 2019 - Accessible on <https://www.undp.org/publications/gender-equality-accelerator-achieving-sdgs>

<sup>4</sup> *Gender equality and women's empowerment in the world of work in fragile, conflict and disaster settings*, ILO, 2023

responsibilities with their other lives. This logic must be reversed: our systems must be adapted to the realities of care needs and women's lives – with care being considered in its broadest meaning and also include care for the environment<sup>5</sup>.

Addressing global multiple and mutually reinforcing crises also requires taking a step back and considering the broader picture. Most of these crises, in particular climate change, environmental degradations and rising inequalities, have their roots in an economic system which totally ignores both the environmental impact of economic activities and the unpaid domestic and care work that sustains society and all the other economic activities. The fixation on GDP growth also ignores deepening inequalities and promotes economic activities that do nothing to improve people and planetary wellbeing – which should be the main objective of governments at every level.

**As Tim Jackson, an ecological economist, rightly says: “without care we are nothing, our progress is nothing. Without care there is no economy”<sup>6</sup>. It is therefore time that we remember that and that we redefine, repurpose and transform our economic and social systems, so that they first serve human and planetary wellbeing, and recognize and support the work of caring for each other and for the planet.**

Transforming to a caring society<sup>7</sup> and wellbeing economy<sup>8</sup> would not only contribute to recognizing, redistributing and supporting the work of caring, in particular mothers' work – which is central to ensure the sustainability of life, wellbeing for all, and advance gender equality - but also contribute to mitigating global crises beginning with climate change, environmental issues and rising inequalities.

This is also about rethinking the dominant development model, which is based on the exploitation of natural resources and women's unpaid or underpaid care work, and making caring for people and the planet a central concern in development projects and funding.

Centering our economy and our society on care, offers a possible – and maybe the only – way out of the global crises the world faces today – and it is more urgent than ever.

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<sup>5</sup> According to UN Women, “unpaid care work includes direct and indirect care for people and living environments. It encompasses direct care, indirect care, environmental care, domestic and communal work that take place in the household or in the wider community” – see *The climate-care nexus: addressing the linkages between climate change and women's and girls' unpaid care domestic and communal work*; working paper, UN Women, 2023 – available at <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/working-paper-the-climate-care-nexus-en.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> #BeyondGrowth conference at the European Parliament, Brussels, May 2023 - <https://timjackson.org.uk/invisible-heart/>

<sup>7</sup> Latin America is one step ahead on this path: the *Buenos Aires Commitment*, which was adopted at the November 2022 session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean – organised by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), recognizes Care as a right and promotes a 'caring society' - <https://conferenciamujer.cepal.org/15/en/documents/buenos-aires-commitment>

<sup>8</sup> See the work of the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) – <https://www.weall.org>