



UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) side-event

Mothers, unpaid care work and global crises - *connecting the dots*

“GDP has no way for accounting the estimated 16.4 billion hours spent every day worldwide on unpaid work, largely carried by women, that underpins the world economy (...) we urgently need to look beyond profit, beyond the short-term and beyond the interests of the few”

Olivier de Schutter, 2 July 2024, [The Guardian](#)

On 11 July 2024, Make Mothers Matter organised a side-event to the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) to discuss mothers, unpaid care work, and how it connects to global crises. Moderated by **Adriana Quiñones, Head of Human Rights and Development and Deputy Head, UN Women Geneva Office**, the panel analysed some of the global crises we face (in particular climate change and other environmental crises, the debt crisis, poverty...) through a care lens. The panel also highlighted how the current economic system is at the root of these crises, a system that is inadequate in responding in a fair and sustainable manner, accounting for the disproportionate impact on women.

Here is a look back at some key takeaways and solutions offered by each speaker.

Yusra Qadir, Chief Programs and Advocacy Officer, Mothers Matter Canada (MMC): the impact of crises-triggered forced displacement on Mothers

- Forced displacement due to conflicts or climate change severely impacts women and children
- While women already face an unfair motherhood penalty, displaced women face additional barriers due to their resettlement or integration processes. These women often cannot work or study; they face poverty, social isolation, language challenges, and crippling childcare costs
- In a feminist context, **“rest is resistance”**

→ Recommendations:

- *Recognise unpaid care work through holistic and intersectional approaches*
- *Call out discriminatory, non-feminist and racist policies*
- *Engage men and boys as allies to the cause*
- *Amplify voices of vulnerable groups through events like this one*

Lorena Aguilar, Executive Director, Kaschak Institute for Social Justice for Women and Girls (Binghamton University New York): the climate-care nexus

- Climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation accelerate and intensify the interlinked crises
- **Climate change and environmental degradation lead to an increase in unpaid care work:**
 - The reduction in natural resources availability affects women's unpaid work (like fetching water or collecting firewood)
 - Fragile food ecosystems affect subsistence farming: the gender gap in food security has widened from 1.7% in 2019 to 4.3 % in 2021
 - Climate change has health repercussions including mental health, increasing health care needs
 - Environmental care adds to women's unpaid workload
- **Mitigation or adaptation solutions also often increase women and girls' unpaid care work**
- Multilateral environmental agreements lack mandates on unpaid care work
- Gender-responsive climate action is an opportunity for achieving the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care

"We should recognise care as a public good, a universal right and a building block for the wellbeing of societies, economies and environment"

→ **Recommendations:**

- *Envision solutions reducing, not increasing, women's and girl's unpaid care work*
- *Increase investment in labour-saving sustainable infrastructure systems and improve public service provision*
- *Build knowledge on these linkages*

Iolanda Fresnillo, Policy and Advocacy Manager - Debt Justice, Eurodad: the impact of the debt crisis on women's rights and gender justice

- There is a widespread debt crisis affecting developing countries but there is no solution within our system that is timely or fair
- Debt diverts resources from healthcare, education, social protection, and climate action because international financial institutions and the global liberal mindset pressure governments to adopt austerity measures to relieve their debt
- **Women act as shock absorbers of austerity policies, performing the work that public services stop providing**
- In addition, austerity measures disproportionately affect women through
 - a reduction in subsidies or services covering women's needs
 - the privatisation of public services leading to an increase in prices for basic services
 - a reduction in public workers (whereas the public sector is a key source of formal work for women)
- The climate crisis and the debt crisis have cumulative negative impacts on women's rights and gender justice

→ **Recommendations:**

- *Reform the economic and financial system: adopt a fair, transparent and multilateral framework for debt crisis resolution*
- *Deliver unconditional debt cancellation for climate vulnerable countries*
- *Decouple debt resolution from austerity and IMF programs*
- *Adopt a new approach to debt sustainability adding feminist and climate justice perspectives*

Céline Charveriat, Founder and Director, Pro(to)topia: a strained human care systems and the ecological crisis

“The purpose of society is to be able to care for oneself, to care for others and to care for the planet”

- We have twin crises: a human care system put under more strain with the ecological crisis, with multiple effects:
 - Higher morbidity and mortality of family members
 - Disrupted ecosystems and public care infrastructures
 - Higher prices of essential goods and services
 - Impact on the ability to access income and assets
 - Reduced availability of social protections
 - Displacement
- Societal demand for unpaid care work increases while the support of caregivers is reduced
- Global aging also increases long-term care needs
- The twin crises are rooted in the same causes:
 - Societal norms fail to distribute care work evenly and devalue caregivers
 - The economic system perceives caring as a given - no one wants to invest in

→ **Recommendations:**

Build caring societies, based on 3 interconnected pillars:

- *Environmental policies: damage limitation and just adaptation, care-sensitive environmental policies and tech, valuing the care for commons*
- *Social policies: climate proof and sustainable care infrastructure and services, universal social protection floor, reduced working week and other policies to reduce time poverty*
- *Economic policies: ‘care-full’ metrics to move ‘beyond GDP’, people’s sovereign funds, making ‘un-carers’ pays just as polluters pays*

Olivier de Schutter (UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights)

“Today we know that about 600 million women globally remain outside the workforce due to the fact that it is they who have to care”

- The **care economy is crucial but undervalued**; women’s unpaid care work is worth \$11 trillion
- Gender discrimination keeps wages low in the care economy: governments need to intervene much more in how wages are set

- In addition, the debt crisis and high inflation induce governments to adopt austerity policies therefore cutting on public services to keep the trust of rating agencies

“Today, globally 3.1 billion people live in countries that spend more on servicing the public debt than they spend on health or education”

- Upcoming report on mental health and poverty will call for addressing the social determinants of mental health issues

“The lack of economic security and precarious work or status anxiety results in a global burnout pandemic”

→ **Recommendations:**

- *Reshape and repurpose our economic system from GDP growth-focused to human rights and wellbeing-focused economies*
- *Shift taxes from taxing income from work to taxing wealth*
- *Invest in the care economy as well as public infrastructure and services – address inequities linked to unpaid care work*

Our panel drove home the key message of the event: how care is a common thread to address the multiple crises we currently face and how women and, more specifically mothers, act as shock absorbers in these crises. The interconnectedness of these issues should urge us to adopt comprehensive policies to build more equitable, caring and resilient societies embedded in wellbeing economies.

Resources:

- *The Climate Care nexus*, work document, UN Women (2023)
- *Economies that dare to Care* report, and *Caring: a solution for our societies in Crisis* work document, Hot or Cool Institute
- Forum for caring societies
- Wellbeing Economy Alliance
- Annual Thematic Report of 2024 from Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, available on the [OHCHR website](#)
- *The poverty of growth*, Olivier de Schutter (Pluto press, 2024)
- *Addressing Crises Through a ‘Care Lens’*, HLPF written statement, Make Mothers Matter (2024)

About Make Mothers Matter (MMM)

Make Mothers Matter believes in the power of mothers to make the world a better place, advocating for their recognition and support as changemakers. Created in 1947, MMM is an international NGO with no political or religious affiliations, transparently voicing the concerns of mothers at the highest level: the European Union, UNESCO and the United Nations (general consultative status). MMM also federates a network of about 40 grassroots organisations working in about 30 countries across the world to support and empower mothers and their families, and to advance the human rights of women and children.