



64th UN Commission on Social Development

Panel discussion on Emerging issues

“Eradicating poverty and ensuring dignity through
resilient care and support systems”

Segment II: Comprehensive care systems as enablers of
gender equality, social inclusion and dignity

Comprehensive Care Systems as Enablers of Gender Equality, Social Inclusion and Dignity

Statement delivered by Farah Arabe, Board member and Main representative to the UN in New York

Madame Chair,
Excellencies,
Distinguished colleagues,

Care is one of the most powerful—and most underestimated—forces shaping our societies.

From the perspective of caregivers, especially mothers – and I am one myself-, care is not an abstract sector or a residual policy issue. It is the daily work of sustaining human life, developing human capability, and transmitting dignity, resilience, values and love from one generation to the next. Social development is, at its core, about people—and foundational to people are mothers and all those who care.

Yet care systems remain chronically underprioritized, not because evidence is lacking, but **because our unpaid labour is taken for granted and because short-term political horizons too often prevail over long-term human and societal impact**. If we are serious about inclusive social development, this undervaluing of care and the political calculus must change.

Today, I would like to underscore three core messages.

- First, caregiving is a **foundational public good** with profound economic, social, and intergenerational returns.
- Second, the current care deficit is **systemic, not individual**, and disproportionately borne by women—especially mothers.
- Third, comprehensive care and support systems represent one of the **most strategic, coherent, and cost-effective investments** governments can make to advance gender equality, social inclusion, dignity, and long-term human flourishing.

Let me begin with the scale and global significance of caregiving.

Unpaid care and domestic work—performed overwhelmingly by women—is estimated to represent **between 10 and 39 percent of GDP**, if valued at an hourly minimum wage¹. In many

¹ United Nation General Assembly revised draft resolution A/C.2/80/L.30/Rev.1

countries, it can surpass the economic contribution of manufacturing, commerce, or transportation². Yet it remains largely invisible in national accounts and persistently undervalued -event ignored- in policy design.

At the same time, the returns to investing in care are extraordinary. Closing care gaps—particularly in childcare—could, by 2035, generate **up to 300 million additional jobs globally**, raise global employment rates by **six percentage points**, reduce the gender employment gap by **seven points**, and yield **nearly four dollars in GDP for every one dollar invested**.³

Care is not a side policy of economic and social development; it is the system that makes development possible.

But -as any mother can tell you- the value of care cannot be captured by economic metrics alone.

Caregiving is a **comprehensive, multidimensional, and deeply relational function** carried out daily—most often by women—within families and communities. Caregivers care for the whole person, integrating physical, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Mothers, in this sense, are not only economic, educational and physical labour actors; they are the **emotional and relational infrastructure of our societies**.

What happens within caregiving relationships shapes life trajectories.

Decades of evidence show that stable, and responsive caregiving relationships during a child's early years drive healthy brain and biological systems development, protect against the traumatic effects of adversity, and promote lifelong physical, mental and relational health. Conversely, adverse childhood experiences—often compounded by caregiver stress, poverty, conflict and lack of support—are associated with lower educational attainment, reduced productivity, higher health and social costs, and increased risks of violence and social fragmentation.^{4,5,6,7}

This is why care must be understood as **foundational work**, not crisis management. Too often, public systems are designed to put out fires—responding once harm has already occurred—rather than to invest in the relationships and caregiving conditions that prevent harm in the first place.

Early relationships are an engine of sustainable development. They are **sustainable across generations, scalable through reproduction, hyper-localized in impact, cost-effective through prevention, and central to dignity in how we relate to one another**.

If we aspire not only to human development, but to **human flourishing**, care must sit at the centre of our social development strategies.

Yet caregivers do not operate in isolation (and here is where I transition to point number 2). The challenges we face are deeply **systemic and structural**.

² [United Nations General Assembly revised draft resolution A/C.2/80/L.30/Rev.1](https://www.un.org/development/desa/2025/) – Contribution of the Care Economy to Sustainable Development (2025)

³ Ibid, quoting ILO statistics

⁴ [From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1753833/), National Research Council and Institute of Medicine Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development (2000).

⁵ [Early Relational Health: Building Foundations for Child, Family and Community Well-Being \(2025\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1753833/). National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

⁶ [What Surrounds Us Shapes Us](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1753833/), Harvard Center for the Developing Child, Harvard University

⁷ [Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development: A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1753833/), World Health Organization, 2018.

Gender norms continue to allocate the majority of unpaid care to women. Globally, women perform, on average, **two to two and a half times more unpaid care and domestic work than men**.⁸ These norms are reproduced across generations unless deliberately interrupted—reinforcing inequality in households, workplaces, and public life alike. Supporting caregiving and ensuring it is more equitably shared is therefore essential to breaking intergenerational cycles of inequality.

Workplace systems frequently treat caregiving supports—such as paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and return-to-work pathways—as discretionary benefits, rather than as pillars of economic resilience and social sustainability. This gap is even more pronounced for the **60 percent of workers that constitute the global informal economy**⁹, who remain largely excluded from formal labour and contributory social protections.

Care also remains **undervalued and under-measured**. While rarely measured, when measured, the economic value of care is calculated at minimum wage levels, hiding real opportunity costs for mothers and other unpaid caregivers.^{10,11} Despite encouraging momentum, there is still no internationally agreed statistical definition of care^{12,13} work, limiting visibility, comparability, and accountability. This invisibility and undervaluation perpetuate underinvestment—despite care being indispensable to economic and social functioning.

The consequences are predictable.

Maternal mental health strain is widespread and persistent. A pioneering study conducted by Make Mothers Matter on the State of Motherhood in Europe found that more than 67% of mothers say they feel mentally overloaded, and half report experiencing mental health struggles such as anxiety, depression, or burnout.¹⁴ Crucially, maternal mental health is one of the **strongest predictors of a child's mental health, socio-emotional development, and lifelong outcomes**¹⁵. Time poverty, invisible labor, and economic insecurity constrain women's agency and choice, limit career continuity, compromise financial independence, and reduce lifetime earnings, savings, and pension accumulation.¹⁶

When care systems fail, **societies pay the price**—through lower productivity, declining fertility, widening inequalities, higher health expenditures, and weakened social cohesion.

If social development is about people, then mothers are its foundation—and care systems are how we protect that foundation.

⁸ [Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals – The Gender Snapshot \(2025\)](#). UN Women and UN DESA.

⁹ International Labor Organization, [Topic Portal: Informal Economy](#)

¹⁰ [Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work](#), seminal ILO Report on care (2018)

¹¹ [Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Inequality Crisis – Methodology Note](#). Oxfam (2020).

¹² According to the [ILO Department of Statistics website](#), the ILO *Technical Working Group on international statistical standards for care work measurement (TWG_CWM)* was established in July 2025. The 22nd International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), scheduled for 2028, will focus on establishing new international statistical standards for the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), care work, and occupational safety and health - in time for use in the 2030 round of the Population and Housing Censuses.

¹³ [Statistical Definitions of Care Work: Meeting of the UN Expert Group on Innovative and Effective Ways to Collect Time-Use Statistics](#). International Labor Organization (2024).

¹⁴ [The State of Motherhood in Europe 2024: Key Findings from the Make Mothers Mother 2024 Survey](#).

¹⁵ [Mothers' Difficult Childhoods Impact their Children's Mental Health](#). National Institute of Mental Health (2023).

¹⁶ [United Nations General Assembly revised draft resolution A/C.2/80/L.30/Rev.1](#) – Contribution of the Care Economy to Sustainable Development (2025)

What, then, must change? Here is where I go to point number 3.

From the perspective of caregivers and parents, we need a shift from fragmented, short-term interventions to **comprehensive, cross-sectoral, coordinated care ecosystems** embedded across the life course.

This requires policy coherence across our global commitments. There is a clear through-line from the **Copenhagen to Doha**, and onward to **Agenda 2030**. Care and support systems are the connective tissue that can align poverty eradication, decent work, gender equality, health, education, and social inclusion into one integrated development agenda.

At the national and local levels, this means investing not only in basic infrastructure and services like water, energy, healthcare, etc. that are critical for unpaid caregivers, but also in **family-friendly policies** that treat care, time and the conditions needed for healthy intra-family relationships also as essential social infrastructure: For example, inclusive and adequately paid parental leave for all caregivers; accessible, quality childcare; parenting education, family and mental health support; and flexible work arrangements that do not penalize care and caregivers.

It also means scaling **universal, preventive parenting and caregiver support programs**, with targeted pathways for families facing specific challenges, in particular single-parent families. Community-based models, including those within the **social and solidarity economy**, can deliver culturally responsive, people-centred care while creating decent work and strengthening social ties.

Above all, this requires **political will that extends beyond electoral cycles**—a willingness to prioritize long-term human outcomes over short-term metrics. **We cannot build long-term social progress with short-term political vision—care, in practice and in policy, demands coherence and courage across generations.**

Excellencies, in closing:

Care is where policy meets humanity. When we invest in care, we are not only supporting caregivers; we are shaping who children become, how societies treat vulnerability, and what future generations inherit. When we fail to invest, the costs do not disappear—they accumulate quietly, unevenly, and across generations.

We must move beyond short-term, siloed fixes—and instead build the comprehensive, coordinated caregiving foundations that allow human potential to unfold fully, equally, and with dignity, from one generation to the next.

Thank you.