



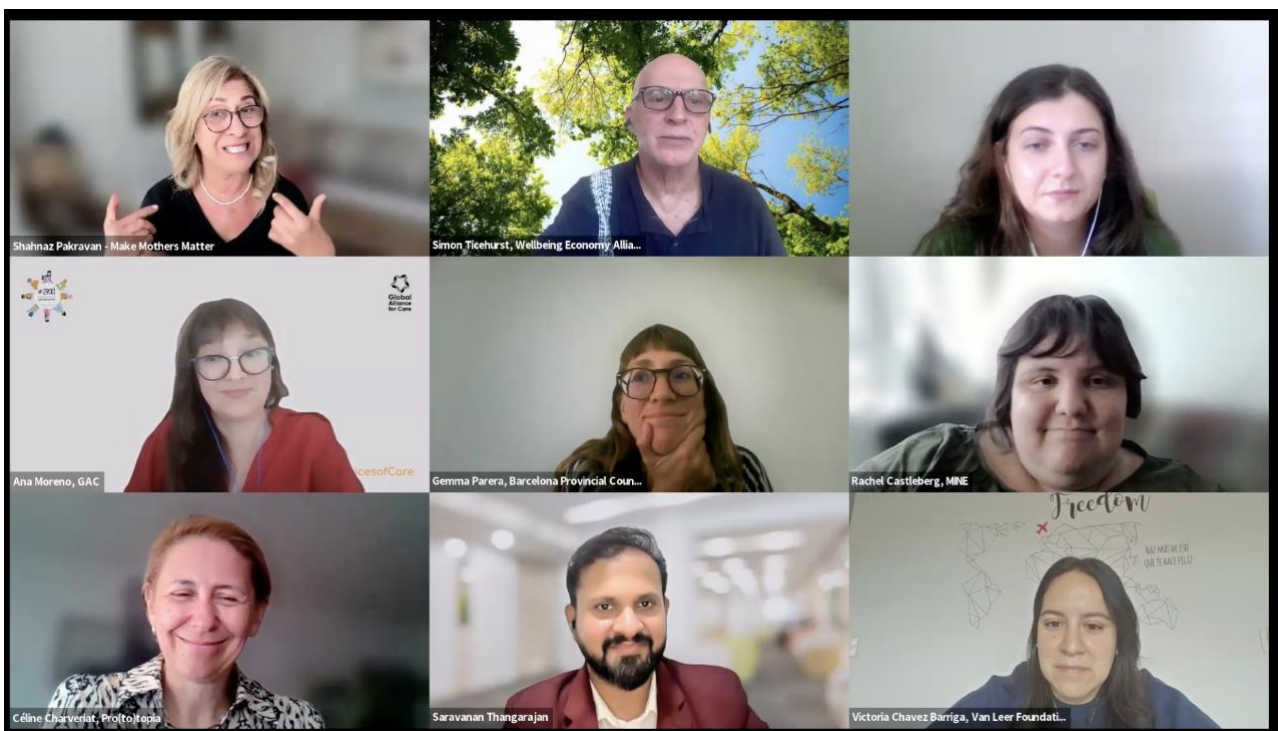
Make
Mothers
Matter

Rethinking Cities Through Care: People, Planet and the 2030 Agenda

Online Side-Event to the UN 2026 HLPF
8 July 2026



Event Report



The side event, held as a panel discussion, aimed to highlight the transformative potential of caring cities to recognise, support and redistribute unpaid care work, advance women’s rights – particularly those of mothers – and foster cross-sector collaboration in support of the 2030 Agenda.

Setting the Scene: The Well-Being Economy Perspective

Simon Ticehurst, Movements and advocacy lead at the Well-Being Economy Alliance framed the discussion around the transformative potential of “caring cities” to address unpaid care work, which is disproportionately carried out by women, especially mothers. Although often invisible and regarded as a cost rather than an investment, care underpins the functioning of societies and economies.

Innovative Urban care initiatives from Latin America – such as “care blocks” in Bogotá and the “Utopías” project in Mexico City – demonstrate how caring policies enhance well-being for people and the planet.

The “caring cities” concept calls for a paradigm shift away from economic extraction toward urban planning focused squarely on equity and well-being.

Understanding Caring Cities: Conceptual Framing

For Céline Charveraat, founder and director of Pro(to)topia (France), the “caring cities” concept is grounded in the recognition of a triple crisis:

1. Self-care in crisis – individuals struggling to care for themselves
2. Collective care systems under immense strain, disproportionately affecting caregivers like mothers
3. A neglectful attitude toward non-human life and ecosystems

Cities amplify these crises due to their concentration of populations (half of global population live in cities, 80% in Urban areas) and significant ecological footprints, including pollution and urban heat islands.

Céline stressed the need to reimagine cities as dynamic webs of relationships – among humans, animals, water cycles, and natural rhythms—with these relationships serving as the primary unit in urban policy design.

The idea of Caring cities is a bottom-up agenda with origins in global south cities, especially Latin America, focusing on recognising unpaid household work as a root cause of the care crisis. Successful interventions integrate environmental resilience, social repair, and psychological healing. Participation and addressing “time poverty” – a major driver of wellbeing deficits – are central to these designs. Local policy experiments, such as students designing a “caring city” in the south of France envisioning abundant time for self and community care, exemplify practical applications.

Céline highlighted the growing momentum at the global level, referencing a recent congress of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) representing 240,000 local governments advocating care as a universal human right and a cross-sectoral priority for sustainable futures. She invites further engagement through the Forum for Caring Societies that she co-founded.

Feminist Perspective on Caring Cities

Ayşe Göç, Expert of International Affairs and Projects at Marmara Municipalities Union (Türkiye) highlighted the gendered dimensions of care, emphasising that care work is predominantly unpaid, performed by women, and intricately entangled with traditional gender norms of sacrifice and compassion. When care is commodified or treated solely as a private family matter, it exacerbates gender and income inequalities.

She underscored the crucial role of municipalities in shifting care from private to shared public responsibility by organising spaces, services, and everyday routines that determine care accessibility.

Key municipal care policy principles include:

- Proximity of services to reduce travel time and ease access to childcare and eldercare
- Transforming gender norms through awareness campaigns, parenting workshops, and inclusive language that shifts the narrative from “support for mothers” to “support for all caregivers”
- Improving caregivers’ quality of life, recognising that the care crisis is not only a shortage of services but also involves caregivers’ well-being

Ayşe also shared a few practical initiatives led by member municipalities:

- “Reclaiming streets”: a citizen-driven urban design program to create pedestrian and caregiver-friendly streets, with 15 transformed streets and expansion underway
- Early childhood home learning programs: home visits supporting children at risk of poverty

- Mobile daycare buses in Istanbul districts that offer on-site child supervision during parental events, increasing caregivers' free time

Designing Cities from a Young Child's Perspective

Victoria Chavez, Senior Urban95 expert at the Van Leer Foundation introduced the radical approach adopted by the Foundation's Urban95 Programme: envisioning cities as seen through the eyes of a three-year-old child (average height 95 cm). This perspective shift is pivotal because early childhood brain development is rapid and critically influenced by environment. Roughly 500 million young children live in vulnerable conditions within cities, comprising 30-35% of urban populations.

Investing in early childhood is high-return, with some studies citing returns of up to 17\$ for every dollar invested. Cities must therefore rethink urban planning and services to support both young children and their caregivers. Scientific evidence shows that adverse neighbourhood conditions – including violence, marginalisation, pollution – disrupt brain and psychosocial development.

Victoria emphasised supporting caregivers is equally important since parental mental health, social support, and well-being directly impact child development. Awareness of neurobiological changes in caregiving (maternal and paternal brain adaptations) highlights this phase as a critical life window requiring systemic support.

She proposed four pillars for caring city planning for early childhood:

1. Data collection on locations and needs of children and parents
2. Encouragement of healthy behaviours adapted to urban realities
3. Listening to parents' voices for participatory planning
4. Design guidelines for diverse, socially embedded urban spaces, from playgrounds to community areas

To conclude, she shared practical examples of integrating nature into urban spaces, creating communal meeting points for parents, and practical adaptations to ease childcare logistics such as proximity and safety.

Barcelona's Caring Municipalities Model

Gemma Parera, Technical advisor in social sustainability at Barcelona Provincial Council outlined Barcelona's progressive, systemic approach, supporting 311 municipalities with financial, technical, legal, and training resources to enhance care services focused on equity and innovation.

Key care services include respite care for families with dependent relatives or persons with disabilities, emotional support groups for informal caregivers, and home adaptations to ease caregiving load.

Barcelona's innovation is its "Caring Municipalities Model", based on five pillars:

1. Reducing family caregiving load via services and training
2. Social redistribution of caregiving responsibilities through public services
3. Recognising care's social centrality through awareness campaigns
4. Reducing gender and social inequalities linked to caregiving
5. Empowering caregivers via support groups and participatory policy-making

Implementation involves cross-sectoral political and technical groups within municipalities, diagnostics of care needs and resources, participatory processes involving caregivers and care receivers, culminating in tailored care strategies.

Complementing the care strategy are local time management plans analysing and optimising time use in the municipality, especially addressing women's time poverty.

The Role of Community Spaces: Mother Centres

Rachel Castleberg, Project coordinator at Mother centres International Network for Empowerment (MINE), focused on the critical social infrastructure provided by mother centres, i.e. community spaces that foster connection, trust, and social cohesion for mothers and caregivers.

These spaces help overcome isolation by creating opportunities for face-to-face diverse social interactions, which are essential for democratic participation and community resilience. Mother centres uniquely accommodate parents with young children, enabling participation without the challenges typical of traditional civic spaces (childcare concerns, noise).

By facilitating micro-democracy and social support, these centres increase caregivers' sense of empowerment and self-efficacy, and model democratic engagement for children from an early age.

Municipalities investing in such spaces view them as foundational infrastructures for societal well-being and democracy, not just community hobbies. Partnerships with grassroots organisations allow for innovation based on lived experience, which informs inclusive policy development.

Rachel also referenced the "Mothers for Peace and Ecology" project, highlighting community-level impacts and policy recommendations that strengthen caring values in local governance.

Climate Change and Maternal Well-being

Dr Saravanan Thangarajan, Founder of CliMent and Mittal Associate at Harvard University brought attention to maternal well-being challenges amplified by climate change in urban settings. He shared the narrative of a new mother struggling with extreme heat and unreliable infrastructure, representing the inseparable link between climate stress and caregiving strain.

Heatwaves, floods, and related climate shocks disrupt care routines, prenatal and postnatal healthcare access, and mental health, disproportionately overloading mothers who bear the invisible labour of managing family care under stress. The mental health impacts, including increased anxiety and postpartum depression, are often overlooked in climate and health policies.

Key policy imperatives he suggested include:

- Explicitly naming mothers and caregivers in climate action and urban planning
- Designing public spaces with care infrastructure such as shaded resting areas and safe, accessible bus stops
- Ensuring continuity of care services during emergencies through proactive backup plans and clear maternal health referral pathways

Saravanan also advocates a care impact test for all city plans to safeguard caregivers, emphasising that climate-resilient cities must also be care-resilient.

Q&A highlights

Panelists addressed questions about the relevance of the SDGs given current backsliding globally. Céline and others stressed that care is a vital connecting thread among health, gender equality, climate change, and economic goals, urging for it to be central in the post-2030 development agenda. Efforts at local government levels and civil society show growing momentum despite concerns about the abstractness of SDGs.

Rachel highlighted the empowerment that community and care networks provide caregivers, enabling their full participation in society beyond individual isolation.

Discussions focused on integrating caregiving with nature through thoughtful urban design, including ways to reduce mental load and practical logistics challenges facing parents in cities (e.g., school pickup times). Solutions tie spatial and social programming to lived experiences of caregivers.

The panelists collectively envision a caring city as one with inclusive, accessible urban environments that prioritise marginalised groups, foster social connection, normalise caregiving visibility, and welcome active participation from women, children, elders, and caregivers.

Closing Remarks

Ana Moreno, Technical secretary at the Global Alliance for Care (GAC), reflected on the vibrant momentum of the care agenda evidenced by collaborations such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and the GAC, which has over 350 member organisations worldwide tackling care in connection with climate, migration, disability, and more.

She noted the evolutionary nature of care-sensitive urban agendas emerging from earlier calls for gender-sensitive and age-sensitive cities, emphasising the importance of territorialising care policies to facilitate local implementation.

Ana stressed the democratic nature of these processes, which require participation, consensus, and continuous advocacy to strengthen care as integral to sustainable urban futures.

She highlighted ongoing conversations and future collaborative opportunities to embed care as a transformative principle for cities consistent with the 2030 Agenda.

About Make Mother Matter - MMM

Since 1947, MMM has been at the forefront of advocating for mothers' rights and recognition worldwide, raising awareness amongst policy makers and the general public on the contributions of mothers towards social, cultural and economic development. MMM has no political or religious affiliations. Working with local partners, MMM advocates on influential global platforms including the European Union, the United Nations (General Consultative Status), and UNESCO, ensuring that the lived realities of mothers are voiced and acknowledged.

More information on www.makemothersmatter.org