



## Changing Narratives about Unpaid Care Work and the Economy

A REPORT on MMM's virtual HLPF Side-Event 14 July 2021



### Objectives of the side-event

- Raise awareness of the multiple benefits of taking a more holistic approach to “work”, i.e. considering both paid and unpaid care work, by recognizing that unpaid care is indispensable work that sustains the economy and develops valuable skills
- Make the case for a paradigm shift in our economic narrative around Care, so that in budgets, spending on care, education, health and family support, are considered as investments – not as expenses to be minimized
- Showcase examples of good policies/practices that can change perspectives and views on unpaid care work and our economy

- Call on governments and international organisations to seize the opportunity to transform our economy and move from the short-term and exploitative “GDP growth” narrative to the ‘wellbeing economy’ narrative

See <https://makemothersmatter.org/unpaid-care-work-is-work-that-our-economic-system-must-recognize-invest-in-and-support> for additional background information and speakers’ short bios.

**This event builds on our 2020 HLPF side-event on ‘Care and Education – Cornerstones of just and sustainable economies’<sup>1</sup>**

### Key takeaways

1. Narratives and norms on care exist in the social sphere but also within institutions, influencing policy and investment decisions. Technology and public services alone won’t shift women’s workload. **it’s the combination of these investments and the narrative and norms changes, that lead to sustainable changes in women’s live**
2. The pandemic gives us the opportunity to question what ‘work’ means, and which work matters for society. **Whether paid or unpaid, care work is indeed ‘work’, skilled work. It must be counted in labour force statistics**, and ultimately in the measure of our economies: giving visibility to the enormous economic importance of unpaid care is critical for recognition
3. **Redistribution** of unpaid care work is key to closing the care gap: care policies must **promote men’s equal participation in caregiving**, which means challenging gender norms and the narrative that care is a woman’s duty. But men must also be held accountable as politicians and decision makers. Every stakeholder must be involved in Care: in a new **‘caring economy’**, we would all be **‘citizen carers’**
4. **Private companies also have a role to play** – and they can only gain from caring for caregivers, in particular mothers. **Caregiving develops life/soft skills** which are also valuable for a company
5. We must show the **benefits of supporting and investing in care**, in particular on wellbeing outcome – and the costs of not doing so, and **challenge the perception that care is a ‘burden’** and only constraints women’s lives. Care should be at the heart of our society and our economy and hence at the **center of policymaking through a national Care policy** – instead of piecemeal fixes to the existing system in the name of gender equality
6. **Care services and Social Protection** are key elements of a national Care policy, to support, redistribute and even reward unpaid care work (e.g. through paid leaves); and they must be considered as an investment, an **investment in people’s human capabilities, which provides both economic and social payoffs**. They must also be transformative – i.e. acknowledge the work of caring without reinforcing gender stereotypes and discriminations against women
7. The design of the pension system, which is part of social protection, also matters a lot. It should have a redistributive effect and reflect the fact that **unpaid care is a collective responsibility**
8. For sustainable positive change, we need to work with unexpected allies beyond the women’s rights sphere, and invest in a narrative shift as a strategy at both community and institutional levels

<sup>1</sup> See <https://makemothersmatter.org/placing-care-education-at-the-heart-of-a-new-economic-system/>

## Introduction

### Anne-Claire de Liedekerke, President, Make Mothers Matter

- Unpaid care work is a necessity, a resource, an investment, a treasure. Yet, it is at the root of gender inequality and a cause of economic injustice for those who do most of it, i.e. women, mothers in particular
- Changing narratives on unpaid care work and the economy is a first and necessary step to bring about change to address this injustice



### Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

- The Covid-19 pandemic has led us to questioning **what “work” means and which work matters**. We start to move away from the idea that it is the market that should determine the value of work, despite the fact that some jobs contribute very little to the common good or even have negative externalities for society, to the idea that some types of work, including the unpaid care work performed in households, have immense positive externalities that deserve to be better recognized and rewarded
- An initial question is **how to acknowledge this work without reinforcing gender stereotypes** (a question which must be raised particularly when considering a family wage or the introduction of a universal basic income)
- **Social services and public infrastructures** (e.g. water, energy, childcare, etc.) are essential to reduce the burdensome aspect of domestic chores, and to recognize and support the work of parents and other caregivers so that they can also engage in other activities
- **Redistribution of roles and responsibilities between men and women is also key**, not only to emancipate women, but also to liberate men from stereotypes
- So another key question is **how can social protection be transformative** – and, again, not reinforce gender stereotypes and discriminations against women

### Susan Himmelweit, Feminist economist, Emeritus professor of economics for the Open University in the UK, member of the UK Women’s Budget Group Commission for a Gender Equal Economy (Moderator)

- We all depend on care; it should be a **collective concern and responsibility**
- **Building a more caring society is an investment for us all. Care should be mainstreamed in all policy-making** – not just policy making about care, because care has an impact on nearly all the other aspects of life

- **We need a wellbeing metric other than GDP** to measure the costs and benefits of that investment. And care must be at its heart – because caregiving is the activity that enables people to do and to be what they could not otherwise do or be
- Economies depend on their care systems, and the provision of unpaid care is at the core of these systems
- **In a new caring economy, we would all be ‘citizen carers’** – i.e. our economy should enable and encourage everyone to be able to receive and to give unpaid care
- Instead of expecting unpaid care to pick up the pieces that the economy doesn’t cope with, we have to change the narrative to recognise the centrality of the contribution of unpaid care and to think about how the economy can be better structured around it, so that both caregiving and care-receiving are better experiences, improving well-being and contributing to a **wellbeing economy**

**Part I - Changing the narrative on unpaid care work within families, in workplaces and communities/society**

**Gary Barker, Founder and CEO, Promundo Global<sup>2</sup>**

- **Redistribution is key:** gender equality is also about equality in terms of men and boys’ participation in care work. Globally women still do about 3 times more unpaid care work than men in homes; at the current pace of progress, it will take 92 years to close the care gap



- Covid has put a spotlight on this inequitable distribution and brought many men into ‘forced paternity leave’. It thus provides an opportunity for structural change
- **In its latest *State of the world’s fathers report*<sup>3</sup>, Promundo proposes 7 solution/action areas:**
  1. Well-resourced **National Care policy instead of piecemeal fixes to the existing system** (Example of Uruguay)
  2. **Equitable parental leave:** non-transferable leaves for fathers must increase and must be combined with social norms policy so that fathers feel obligated to take the leave

<sup>2</sup> PowerPoint presentation: <https://makemothersmatter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/202107-HLPF-MMM-event-Gary-Barker-Promundo.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> 2021 *State of the World’s Fathers: Unlocking the Power of Men’s Care* – available on <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/state-of-the-worlds-fathers-unlocking-the-power-of-mens-care/>

3. **Building on existing social protection programs** to promote men’s participation in care work
4. **Using maternal and child healthcare to involve men right from the start** – and it has multiplier effects: reduction of violence, increase in women attending antenatal visits, increase in men’s participation in care work
5. **Starting early** to combat social norms through media campaigns, attention to school curriculum to make it normal for boys to do care work (according to UNICEF, girls already do 3.5 times the amount of care work compared to their brothers)
6. Building on the decent work platform to **support employees also as caregivers** (‘citizen carers’) - acknowledging that we all have work and care duties by providing ongoing support to parents and other caregivers
7. Political will: beyond the home **men must also be accountable for care policy as politicians and decision makers**

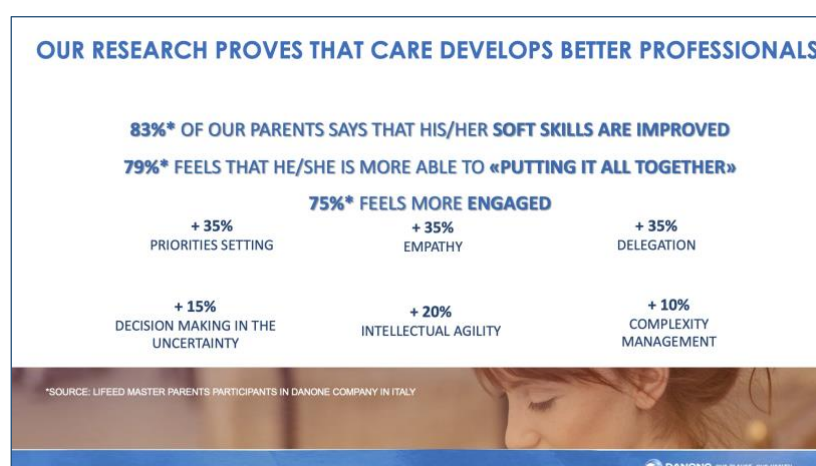
**Sonia Malaspina, Director, Human Resources South Europe, Danone Specialized Nutrition<sup>4</sup>**

- **Companies, especially large companies like Danone, also have a role to play in Care** – Danone is a B-Corp company, caring for people, caring for the planet
- Maternity has long been a taboo topic in companies and has forced too many women out of the workforce (1 in 3 in Italy)

We’ve demonstrated that motherhood and fatherhood don’t penalize the company. These experiences give companies professionals with stronger skills that can unleash their creativity, organizational abilities and lots of other skills that can be recognized and measured with Lifeed.  
**Sonia Malaspina, HR director South Europe Danone SN**

- **Parents, especially mothers need economical, organizational, cultural and, most importantly, psycho-emotional support** – they have value for the company and should not be penalized, but it has been a long journey to convince management that it is a win-win

- A study conducted by Danone Italy shows that **when they come back from maternity leave, mothers have gained or improved skills which are crucial for a company<sup>5</sup>** – and this is also true for fathers coming back from paternity/parental leave and other caregivers who took care of an older person

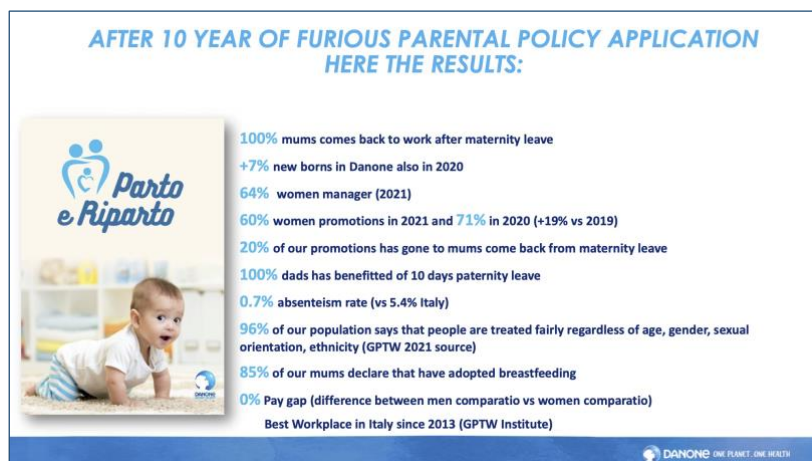


<sup>4</sup> PowerPoint presentation: <https://makemothersmatter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/202107-HLPF-MMM-event-Sonia-Malaspina-Danone-compressed.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The study was conducted with Lifeed - <https://lifeed.io/en/> - See also <https://lifeed.io/en/2019/11/02/danone-mothers-advance-careers/>



- **This means that supporting mothers/parents/caregivers has a return on investment for a company** – which can be measured in both economic and social terms
- Companies/ top management are money driven, so the benefits of supporting care have to be translated into economic language, something measurable like KPI – it is pragmatic
- Companies like Danone Italy can also use these results to change narratives, and influence evidence-based care policy at national level



## **Part II - Changing the narratives on the economy to recognise the central role of unpaid care work**

### **Anam Parvez Butt, Gender Justice Research Lead and Policy Advisor, Oxfam Great Britain<sup>6</sup>**

- Narratives and norms on care and economic inequality exist in the social sphere but also within institutions, influencing policy and investment decisions
- Technology and public services alone don't shift women's workload. **it's the combination of these investments and the narrative and norms changes, that lead to sustainable changes in women's lives**
- **The first narratives to be changed are the gendered narratives** stemming from patriarchal norms, that care is a woman's natural role and duty. In low-income countries, mentoring and providing safe spaces for couples to discuss gender roles can be effective. It is not only about men; women also have to be willing to share the care<sup>7</sup>
- **We also need to shift narratives about work and the economy itself:** what is considered work vs. leisure, skilled vs unskilled. E.g. if care jobs are considered less important to the economy than finance jobs, if cooking or caring for the elderly is considered as leisure activities, then this work is not counted in labour force surveys, economic analysis, or measures of progress. And it is not invested in
- **In our communication, we can turn narratives on their heads** – i.e. instead of saying that women are 'out of the labour force', say instead that men are under-participating in unpaid labour

<sup>6</sup> PowerPoint presentation: <https://makemothersmatter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/202107-HLPF-MMM-event-Aman-Parvez-Oxfam-compressed.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See Oxfam WE-Care programs: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/we-care/>

- **Calculating a monetary value helps make visible the enormous economic importance of unpaid care.** And comparing this value with other sectors of the economy, which are considered to be worth more, can upend some of those existing norms
- 10 years ago, care was still considered a private matter, a ‘woman’s issue’ in development circles. But now, thanks to feminist economists and activists<sup>8</sup> **unpaid care work is increasingly recognized as a public policy issue**
- Local level evidence demonstrating the problem, its impact on the wider society, and a focus on solutions can bring about change. It is in particular important that the time constraints of care work be understood and addressed<sup>9</sup>
- **Connecting narratives on care, economic inequality and poverty**, showing how the extractive economic system widens economic and care inequalities, trapping women in cycles of income and time poverty, makes it possible to **widen the audience beyond women’s rights spaces**
- It is better to **avoid using the term ‘burden’** because it implies that care only needs to be reduced and minimized, we want a reduction in difficult and arduous domestic tasks such as fetching water and firewood. But we do not want a reduction in care itself
- A 2016 Oxfam study on economic narratives in international financial institutions, policies and strategies, showed that **Care was only mentioned as a constraint to women’s labour force participation, something to be reduced to allow for economic growth, not to be invested in** for economic development
- To reframe the narrative from burden to benefit **we need to show the impact of care on wellbeing outcomes**, on the health of caregivers, labour force participation, relationships...
- For sustainable positive change, we need to work with unexpected allies, such as ad agencies, religious leaders, corporations, who all influence our mindsets. We need to **invest in narrative shifts as a strategy at both community and institutional levels**, and also connect with climate justice and economic justice movements

### Shahra Razavi, Director, ILO Social Protection Department

- **Measuring and making unpaid care work visible is critical for a better recognition**
- The 2013 International Conference of Labour Statisticians took a major step forward in this direction as it redefined different categories of work beyond paid work<sup>10</sup>. In particular it

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<sup>8</sup> The 2013 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty, which positioned unpaid care work as a major human rights issue (See <https://undocs.org/A/68/293> ), was a turning point. And the inclusion of target 5.4 in SDGs (see <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda> ) has set a global momentum.

<sup>9</sup> For example, access to an Improved water source can decrease women’s time on unpaid care work in Zimbabwe by 4 hours a day; and evidence like this has led to 28 local government units in the Philippines adopting new laws that make it mandatory to address unpaid care in all planning and budgeting processes.

<sup>10</sup> see [https://www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/standards-and-guidelines/resolutions-adopted-by-international-conferences-of-labour-statisticians/WCMS\\_230304/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/standards-and-guidelines/resolutions-adopted-by-international-conferences-of-labour-statisticians/WCMS_230304/lang--en/index.htm) and [https://data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/PolicyMakerBrief\\_Online-WR-181003.pdf](https://data2x.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/PolicyMakerBrief_Online-WR-181003.pdf)

recognizes the production of services for own use or for others – so in particular unpaid care work – as ‘work’. This means that **unpaid care work should be included in Labour force statistics**

- Still, unpaid care work is not yet included in the System of National Accounts used to calculate GDP. The new definition of work should also lead to unpaid care work being included in the GDP
- **Investments in care services is key to support and redistribute - the burden and the joy of - unpaid care work.** Care services must be widely available, accessible, affordable and meet good quality standards; so good funding is also essential
- The issue of quality links to the **importance of the reward for care workers**, who should receive proper wages commensurate with their expertise and the critical importance of their work
- **Unpaid care work can also be rewarded**, e.g. through paid leave, so that unpaid caregivers are not penalized when they have to temporarily withdraw from the labour market for care reasons
- **The design of the pension system, which is part of social protection, also matters a lot.** It should have a redistributive effect and reflect the fact that unpaid care is a collective responsibility. In particular it must allow for ‘care credits’ so that unpaid caregivers are not penalized in old age
- **Considering care systems and social protection as investments and not just as expenditures is important. It is an investment in people’s human capabilities, so it provides both economic and social payoffs.** It is also an automatic and social stabilizer
- As the Australian demographer Peter McDonald has shown, not supporting unpaid care work through the provision of public services and maintaining a patriarchal culture can result in falling natality rates – below replacement levels. **Failing to support unpaid care work and to ensure that parents and other unpaid caregivers have enough time and resources to do care work, can have a huge cost for society.**
- **But it is equally important to remember that economic policies, including macro-economic policies, always have a social content and huge social implications**
- This is especially important as governments face a crisis and have to find alternatives to austerity or inflation and falling GDP: **economic policy should support social policy and social investment – not destroy human capabilities and exacerbate the resource constraints**

### Selection of comments / inputs from participants

- We appreciate care work goes beyond childcare and nursing. Rural women have to care by providing food for the family, providing unpaid farm care, and care for the natural resource on top of nursing and childcare like we experienced and are still experiencing with Covid 19 response – Pauline, Rural Women Network (Kenya)
- ‘Clean up time! Redesigning Care after Corona’, a Manifesto: <https://care-macht-mehr.com/clean-up-time-redesigning-care-after-corona/> - shared by Karin Jurczyk, Care.Macht.Mehr (Germany, Austria, Switzerland)



- Redistribution should also focus on sharing of resources to reach the caregivers at the local level  
- Violet Shivutse, Home-Based Care Alliance (Kenya)

### Final word

**There is no future without care.  
Let's keep in touch and continue the conversation.  
#ChangeTheNarrative #BeTheChange**



Thank you to our panelists for their insightful presentations

### About Make Mother Matter - MMM

*Make Mothers Matter (MMM) is an international NGO created in 1947 to raise the awareness of policy makers and public opinion on the contribution of mothers to social, cultural and economic development. MMM has no political or religious affiliations, and thus transparently voices the concerns of mothers at international level with permanent MMM representatives at the United Nations (General Consultative Status), UNESCO and the European Union.*

*MMM 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.*