

CARE WORK

Briefing Note

Care work is critical to societal and individual health and wellbeing. This work includes the labour of providing child and elder care, nursing, therapies, and a vast array of health and education services. A robust public infrastructure to promote and protect care entails unemployment insurance, accessible and high quality health care, paid sick leave, appropriate immigration policies, and well-enforced labour standards and laws, among others.

The *care economy* – involving paid and unpaid care work in the public or private spheres – is one of the fastest expanding economic sectors globally. According to the World Economic Forum, almost 40% of all projected job opportunities in emerging professions will have been created in the care sector between 2020 and 2023. Taking into account socio-economic trends such as aging or growing populations, changing family structures, women’s status in labour markets, and shortcomings in social protection policies, the International Labour Organization (ILO) states that by 2030 the number of care recipients is predicted to reach 2.3 billion.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed grave structural deficiencies in the care sectors of the countries of the Americas and Caribbean, most notably gaps in funding, delivery, and regulation. The unprecedented demand for care in the context of COVID-19 crisis deepened already existing inequalities in the gendered division of labour, both paid and unpaid. Gendered social norms and expectations contribute to the misperception of care work as less productive or requiring fewer skills, and thus, lower financial compensation and job security. The association of women with primary caregiving means that these responsibilities fall disproportionately to women and girls, as well as those living in poverty, racialized individuals, and migrants. Indeed, historically in the region (as around the world) the majority of unpaid care work is undertaken by women and girls from socially disadvantaged groups. In homes and communities, they do three-quarters of care and domestic work. While more women have entered the paid labour market, their time spent on unpaid care work has not decreased commensurately, and it has not become more shared by men partners. The pandemic has made these inequalities more urgent than ever to address.

A resilient and just recovery requires systemic change founded in a transformation of political thinking and action that understands care not as an expenditure but as an economic driver and human right. Investing in the care economy not only holds enormous potential for meeting the current needs of the region’s population; it is also a driver of economic stability and growth. As all people will require multiple forms of care throughout their life, innovations to facilitate adequate, high-quality care can be expected to lead to social and economic payoffs. Valuing care work and

making it appealing to people of all genders will maximize human potential; its benefits are to individuals, families, business, and entire economies.

Given that care is a shared responsibility of the state, not solely a personal one, care work requires calculated political action. Important work is increasingly being undertaken in the parliaments of the Americas and Caribbean region to recognize and measure care work and incentivize its financing. Through their legislative roles and leadership, parliamentarians can promote the economic value of the care sector. They can also take actions that help to overcome the gender norms and inequalities faced by those who receive and give care.