

## RE-VALUE the importance of care in society

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Feminist organizations have insisted for decades on the importance of recognizing the systemic role of care work. This invisible work is indispensable for reproducing the labour force<sup>1</sup> and more broadly for sustaining life.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed this feminist message into an accepted truth.

The new coronavirus has forcefully exposed the fragility of human life. All of us face the risk of catching a disease that can kill us. In this context, it is also made very visible that our lives are interdependent. To avoid contagion, we need to take care of ourselves, but we also depend on the whole of society adopting habits of caring. If we get sick, we need the specialized care of people who work in the health sector, but also daily care to meet the daily needs of existence.

Most of the strategies adopted to confront the pandemic, based on physical distancing and social isolation, along with “stay at home” guidelines, have been possible because “at home” there is the regular provision of domestic and care unpaid work that reproduces life on a daily basis. With the closure of schools and of daycare facilities for dependent persons, unpaid domestic and care work in households has increased.<sup>3</sup>

Paid care work has also become more intense and more risky. People who work in the healthcare sector are at the forefront of this increased care, and the high percentage of people with COVID-19 among healthcare workers reflects this increased risk. The risk is higher when the health systems in which they work have been devastated by decades of austerity policies. Paid domestic workers and workers in garbage collection and urban hygiene are also seeing their work increase and their conditions become more difficult.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of greater precariousness and social vulnerability, community care arrangements have proved fundamental in guaranteeing the most basic social rights, such as the right to food. The role of community kitchens or soup kitchens, generally staffed by volunteers, has been fundamental in poor neighbourhoods in many big cities, especially in the global South. Community-based care arrangements have enabled survival in the context of the pandemic, and women’s bodies have been at the forefront of sustaining these collective spaces.

The pandemic has revitalized the idea that essential jobs exist. Care-giving jobs are at the top of that list, even though historically they have been hardly recognized, socially devalued, badly paid and poorly protected. This sense of the essentiality of care should foster a process of transformation in the way in which care is socially addressed.

1 I. Larguía and J. Dumoulin, *Hacia una ciencia de la liberación de la mujer*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 1976.

2 A. Picchio, “Un enfoque macroeconómico ‘ampliado’ de las condiciones de vida.” In C. Carrasco Bengoa, ed., *Tiempos, trabajos y género*. Barcelona: Ediciones UB, 2001.

3 “Cuidados en América Latina y el Caribe en tiempos de Covid19. Hacia sistemas integrales para fortalecer la respuesta y la recuperación.” Santiago: CEPAL, 2020.

4 ILO Monitor: Covid-19 and the world of work. Fifth Edition, Geneva, 2020.

There is ample evidence that the social organization of care is unjust and a vector for the reproduction of inequality.<sup>5</sup> It is unjust because care responsibilities are unequally distributed among the State, the market, the household and the community, as well as between men and women. It is a vector of inequality because possibilities of choosing care arrangements are less, the lower the socio-economic level. Because care demands increase and the possibilities of meeting them decrease when people live in precarious habitats, with little and difficult access to basic social infrastructure (drinking water, sanitation, energy sources). Also, because the social organization of care has become transnational, and in global care chains labour and immigrants' rights are violated.

The unjust social organization of care continues to be at the root of the reproduction of inequalities in economic participation, access to employment, the possibility of earning one's own income, political participation, opportunities for training and the possibility of enjoying leisure time and self-care.

The re-value of care as an essential activity, as a basis for systemic sustainability, should strengthen the agenda for reorganizing care on the basis of social co-responsibility, including the demand for public care policies that guarantee the necessary conditions for choosing desired care arrangements. As this report has said before, there is an urgent need to adopt an integrated approach to public policy strategies that articulate the building of national care systems with the provision of basic social services (water, sanitation, gas, electricity) as well as with access to efficient public transport that can ease care arrangements.<sup>6</sup>

Care policies can also be thought of as key for post-pandemic recovery. Investing in care services will not only enlarge alternatives for care arrangements, but also create direct and indirect employment, as well as enable other sectors of the

economy to function properly. The fast expansion of teleworking as an alternative in many economic sectors also calls for better and more creative alternatives for work-life balance.

The relevance of the local dimension of care policies should also be taken into account. It is worth mentioning the example of the proposal for a local care system in Bogotá, Colombia, that features the design of care provision by neighbourhood, including fixed and mobile care units, and the provision of community spaces to take care of domestic tasks such as laundry.<sup>7</sup>

Democratically expanding horizons of equal care arrangements, allocating public resources to building care infrastructure and recognizing and strengthening community care arrangements are essential elements in any process of building a different way out of the current global crisis.

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5 ILO, Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work. Geneva: ILO, 2018.

6 C. Rodríguez Enríquez, "Care systems and the SDGs. Reclaiming policies for life sustainability." In Spotlight Report on Sustainable Development 2018.

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7 <https://bogota.gov.co/mi-ciudad/mujer/el-sistema-distrital-de-cuidado-un-logro-historico-para-las-mujeres>