
FEMINIST FUTURES

Caring for people, caring for justice and rights

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, communities around the world are weighing the many possible answers to the questions of ‘how did we arrive here?’, ‘what comes after COVID-19?’ and ‘what kind of society do we want to build after this global shock?’ The pandemic has been so extraordinary in nature that in order to engage with these questions we need, in our search for solutions, to break with the ordinary as well.

This paper contains reflections from members of Oxfam’s gender justice community and draws on feminist thinking in order to develop a vision for a caring future, what it might look like and how we might achieve it. Quite humbly and intentionally, this document is not a declaration of Oxfam’s organizational policy positions. Rather it is a discussion paper and an exercise in ideation that envisages possibilities. It is the authors’ intention that the questions that may arise from this reflection can feed into a much larger discussion that we hope to have with our allies, partners and communities around the world.

Our reflection focuses on three pressing challenges to gender justice – achieving social justice, the climate emergency, and the current economic model – and addresses them from both ethics of care and inequality perspectives. Our vision is to achieve social justice and guarantee universal human rights by imagining a different approach to social organization, one that is centred on care as a right and where care informs politics and policies. By reconsidering how we view and provide care, we could reframe the norms and structures that have historically led to exclusion, discrimination and marginalization of women, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour, LGBTQIA+ people, those living in poverty and other groups. We believe that by putting care at the centre of our ethics and our politics, we can address aspects of inequality that are not often considered in policy and institutional action. As a result, it is argued, we should see increased wellbeing, social cohesion and trust.

We are inspired by some of the developments we see emerging around us and believe that the reflections in this paper are relevant for all communities, leaders and institutions in moving us further forward.

The time to act is now; there is no going back.

Oxfam Discussion Papers

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1 THERE IS NO GOING BACK

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating toll around the world. Although death rates have been found to be higher among men,¹ women and girls are facing secondary complications due to the pandemic further entrenching gender-based inequalities. Furthermore, other and intersecting groups such as displaced people, people living in poverty, people of color, and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ have been made vulnerable by decades upon decades of structural exclusion, oppression, and exploitation. This has contributed to these groups being disproportionately affected in the current crisis (see Box 1).

Box 1: The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalized communities

In the first few months of the pandemic and mandated lockdowns:

- In Mexico, official data reports an incremental increase in the rate of violence against women in the context of COVID-19. Between end February and mid-April, more women have been murdered (367) than have died of COVID-19.²
- In São Paulo, Brazil, Black communities have had a 62% higher likelihood of dying from COVID-19 than White communities.³
- In Colombia, civil society organizations point to the context of COVID-19 as exacerbating the vulnerability of human rights activists, with at least 28 activists and human rights defenders murdered in recent months.⁴
- The Parliament of Hungary ended legal recognition for transgender and/or intersex people, pushing the change through amidst the distraction of the pandemic.⁵
- Approximately 30% of people who are LGBTQIA+ in the USA have had their working hours reduced during COVID-19, compared with 22% of the rest of the population.⁶
- After March 2020, a telephone survey conducted by ASAM (The Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants) shows that refugees surveyed in Turkey had difficulty in accessing food items (63%) and hygiene materials (53%) during COVID-19. Unemployment among those interviewed rose from 18% to 88% due to precautions taken against the COVID-19 pandemic. Low wage workers disproportionately lost employment and money because they could not safely work from home.⁷

As the above examples show, the global pandemic appears to have exacerbated the violation of human and economic rights of historically marginalized communities as well as undermined civil society efforts to denounce these violations.

Oxfam's report 'Time to Care' refers to an economic system that unequally and unfairly distributes duties, rights and privileges, as well as resources, spaces, and social roles.⁸ This discussion paper argues that the context of COVID-19 has worsened the divide between extremes of wealth and poverty through both the action, and inaction, of duty-bearers. In the USA, for example, economic stimuli are once again bailing out corporations.⁹ In the same manner, in Mexico, aggressive austerity policies are curtailing funding for social services, disproportionately affecting essential services for women and indigenous peoples.¹⁰ Likewise, the 'hands-off' approach of Nicaraguan leadership has allowed disinformation to spread, risking people from not being able to access life-saving resources.¹¹ In Slovakia, the emergency period has been used to restrict access to sexual and reproductive health services (SRHR).¹²

In multiple countries, prioritizing capitalist economies has been justified by those in power during the COVID-19 pandemic through war-like narratives and language that support authoritarian action and legitimize draconian responses,¹³ whilst (at least in India) stigmatizing patients and destabilizing healthcare systems.¹⁴ In Brazil, China, India, the Philippines, Russia

and the USA, so called 'strongman politics', defined as authoritarian or populist governance with macho and hierarchal leadership,¹⁵ have resulted in the extent of the COVID-19 crisis being initially ignored, downplayed and politicized at key points, endangering collective wellbeing.^{16, 17} Other examples no doubt exist. Such policies and approaches in the context of COVID-19 appear to prioritize economic growth and mass consumption over the wellbeing of people, the advancement of social justice among communities, and the protection of the environment.

In a few short months, the exhausting toll that this prioritization of economic growth has taken on us has been laid bare for all to see: on the environment and our food systems, on our collective health, on our personal leisure and family life, and on our basic freedoms.

There is, simply, no going back.

THE WAY FORWARD

The pandemic has resulted in a critical juncture being reached, highlighting the inequalities in our current systems and offering us the chance to break away from paradigms that for too long have been considered the norm. Imagining and striving for a feminist future will be critical to breaking away, both in the midst of the crisis and the recovery. The choices we make now – to break with the past or to reinforce the old ways – will be with us for decades and generations.

Box 2: Activism during the pandemic

As the pandemic spreads, many communities are creating networks to provide basic goods and services and pushing for policy changes where political leaders have failed. Millions of people across the world have established community structures that draw the outlines of the socially just, inclusive, transformed, feminist futures we aspire to.

- In Iran, neighbourhoods have engaged in mutual aid to feed and care for one another, in spontaneous acts of solidarity.¹⁸
- Young climate activists have seized the window of opportunity and adapted their activism to share plans for greener cities, reduced consumption, wildlife recovery and more.¹⁹
- Activists have called out the super-rich, who continue to grow their fortunes as they fail to pay their dues, and in the same breath called for public bailouts.²⁰
- In the USA, Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations erupted in May 2020 across all 50 states to denounce institutional racism, white supremacy and police brutality, made ever more visible by the pandemic.

The context begs for radical transformation, with care at the center of the COVID-19 response and recovery. Care is more than the physical and emotional work of individuals. Following authors such as Gilligan,²¹ care is here understood as extending to broader relational concern towards the wellbeing of others as well as oneself.

Re-organizing towards this more just society, through valuing and recognizing care, would create a society that moves the attainment of universal human rights – such as the right to food, to housing, to healthcare, to a basic income, to having a voice, to not being discriminated against, and to live free from violence – to the forefront (Glenn, 2000).²² We think that, in the context of deep seated capitalism, racism and patriarchy, there is actually nothing more radical than people and societies unapologetically caring for each other on an equal and equitable basis and being actively supported to do so. We believe this to be the antithesis to an authoritarian, repressive and violent response – instead increasing social justice, and reinforcing democracy, peace and individual and collective wellbeing. Placing care at the centre of our local and global communities is a major political choice.

In 'caring' we can redefine cultures,²³ values and practices, and reshape policies to ensure the wellbeing of everyone in our societies, addressing the root inequalities and systems that have led to sexual and racial oppression. We must eliminate harmful norms by recognizing that care underpins all forms of labour, and that those who have historically provided care – namely women, and particularly Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, LGBTQIA+ groups and those living in poverty or migrants – are of equal value, and not subordinate to those who historically have demanded and received more care, mainly men and boys, people who are well-off, and racially dominant groups. We must develop a new collective voice, agency, leadership and practice that is compassionate and transformative. We must invest in economies that are inclusive and protect human rights, through fairness and mutuality, feminist approaches, and sustainability. We must redefine social solidarity through budgets that prioritize health, education and peace, and apply fiscal justice for the enjoyment, protection and enhancement of people's rights and freedoms.

We envisage a global community that puts care at the centre of future social, political and economic organization, and strives for the attainment of wellbeing, social justice and human rights for all. The content that follows reflects further on three pressing challenges to achieving this: social justice (Section 2), the climate emergency (Section 3), the current economic model (Section 4), and the role of care in the way forward (Section 5).

2 CARING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

*‘Saidiya Hartman said, “care is the antidote to violence.”
If we want to move away from systems of violence,
we have to reimagine a world that centres care.’
Meera Ghani, Covid and Care – Feminist Journeys, 2020.*

THE UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF UNPAID CARE WORK

Care work is an essential part of the experience of being human, it is ‘crucial to our societies and to the economy. It includes looking after children, elderly people and those with physical and mental illnesses or disabilities, as well as domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, washing, mending and fetching water and firewood’.²⁴ Care work is critical to keeping our societies running and makes all other forms of work possible. In most countries, unpaid care work is largely done by women and often goes unseen.²⁵ The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that women dedicate on average 3.2 times more time than men to unpaid care work and that there is no country where women and men perform an equal share.²⁶ According to Ai-Jen Poo, ‘the work of caring is one of the most profoundly transformative in our lives and yet it is frequently an invisible and undervalued work’.²⁷

The values underlying an unfair distribution of care work represent the same dynamic through which elites capture care for themselves, while denying it or making it impossible for others. The giving and receiving of care has long been gendered and tied up in class and inequality, creating a globalized industry²⁸ that caters to the wealthy and racially dominant and underpays and undervalues care workers.²⁹ Even when it is paid, studies show that the conditions of care work, at a local and global scale, maintain problematic if not exploitative labour conditions, asymmetric relations between employers and employees, gender and racial discrimination as well as problems associated with the migration status of an important group of domestic and care workers.³⁰ This is also the case for migrant workers, who are highly represented in informal care work and often fall through formal safety nets. The millions of people providing care, mostly women and girls and the people in situations of poverty and precarious work, should not have to sacrifice their own care needs and wellbeing to survive within the capitalist system. We are all in the same storm, but we are not all on the same boat.

Studies conducted to understand the unpaid care impacts in the context of COVID-19 have shown that lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have put the unpaid care work responsibilities within the household under additional stress, in particular for women³¹ who are more likely to absorb care work responsibilities due to the inaccessibility of public or private social systems that provide care services, such as childcare, schooling, primary healthcare and elder care.³² The new limitations put in place in the context of COVID-19 to access care-related services exacerbate the already unequal distribution of care where the cost and responsibilities are managed as a private manner within families and households. For example, saying that ‘economies are closed’ during the pandemic disregards the direct and indirect economic contribution of care work to society in general.³³ These positions also ignore the billions of underpaid and unpaid workers at the centre of the economy and life itself, yet remain in the shadows. They feed, nurse, drive, deliver and look after entire communities.³⁴ The authors of this paper consider that this neglect is a reflection of how embedded institutionalized sexism,

classism, racism and discrimination are to our current systems, and the extent to which care is excluded from social and economic policy and thinking.³⁵

This pandemic has also shone a light on deeper, problematic gendered attitudes towards care and carers. For example, studies carried out around the globe observed that while men report an incremental increase in their domestic and care work responsibilities during the pandemic, women report still carrying out the major bulk of domestic and care responsibilities within the household.³⁶ The authors consider that the lower and unequal amount of care work that men do at the household level on average,³⁷ despite increases experienced during this time, is neither sustainable nor acceptable in a fair, inclusive society. At best, it is a sign of attitudes, norms and narratives built on the division between private and public space, and the division between productive and reproductive work, with women perceived as being more naturally 'altruistic' and 'loving'.³⁸ At worst, these attitudes uphold male privilege that attempts to justify the exercise of 'power over'³⁹ family members and resources,⁴⁰ and emphasize the status quo of rigid gender roles and models of families – the heterosexual, middle-class, nuclear family,⁴¹ with men as providers and agents in the public space and women as carers. Although a traditional gender division of labor is less prevalent today in some parts of the world, with the incorporation of women into the formal labour market and some overall increased participation in the public space, much more still needs to be done to value care work and redistribute care responsibilities between genders.

It is important to recognize that more and more men are realizing the importance of care work, and the new realities of unpaid care work in the context of COVID-19 might further shift priorities for men. The social structure, rules and incentives that make predominantly women do more care work can also present barriers when men want to step into care roles, as is increasingly the case for young men in many countries. Rigid, hierarchical and patriarchal social norms can undermine, exclude, oppress and ridicule men who choose to do care work.

PROVIDING CARE IN THE SHADOW OF VIOLENCE

During COVID-19 lockdowns, the catastrophic situation for women experiencing violence by men has worsened dramatically. The number of victims of gender-based violence is rising, with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimating a 20% increase worldwide in violence against women and girls, referring to it as the shadow pandemic.⁴² In places like Latin America and the Caribbean, this increase is alarming.⁴³ UN Women reported that the COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting women's mental and emotional health in Asia and the Pacific due to increases in unpaid care work, threats of violence and resulting anxiety.⁴⁴ In addition, the coronavirus lockdowns and socio-economic stress have also exacerbated other forms of violence rooted in patriarchy, such as the killing and harassment of human rights activists or police brutality targeting communities and individuals in situations of vulnerability.

In the domestic sphere, lockdowns have created a breeding ground for violence and discrimination that is rooted in social norms linked to performance of gender roles. As lockdowns are prolonged, these gender roles are hardening. On the one hand, there is social pressure for women to perform traditional gender roles such as cooking, cleaning and caring for children, the elderly and the sick, putting them more at risk. Women are at risk of facing violence when they are deemed by their partner or abuser to not be adequately fulfilling these roles and expectations or even when they share opinions or try to make decisions in the home. The economic insecurity, lack of mobility and perceived loss of control by men leads to the use of violence as a tool of re-asserting power and dominance in the home, while society excuses the violence as part of domestic life in times of stress. As a result, domestic violence, including intimate partner violence as well as abuse towards children and LGBTIQ+ family members, is on the rise, and it now more difficult than ever for survivors to seek help.

Considering the severity of the ‘shadow pandemic’ of gender-based violence, more data needs to be collected, exploring links between trends in care work and gender-based violence and how violence impacts carers from historically underrepresented populations such as Black, Indigenous and People of Colour and LGBTQIA+ populations.

BUILDING SOCIETIES WITH AN ETHICS OF CARE

Based on our analysis of COVID-19 through the lens of care, we argue that the way to address inequalities, including race, gender, class and sexuality, is to put care at the centre of our values, politics and practice. We argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has made care work more visible and shown that it is *essential* to individual rights and societal wellbeing. The concept of building societies around care is neither new, nor exclusive to this paper. Gilligan,⁴⁵ Noddings,⁴⁶ Held,⁴⁷ Conradi,⁴⁸ and Raghuram,⁴⁹ among others, have advanced thinking on the ethics of care theory – a discussion that is rich, nuanced, ongoing and increasingly relevant to social justice and human rights propositions. Ethics of care is grounded in an understanding of morality and decision making that centres around ‘care’ as an integral part of both public and private life: a collective, social responsibility that is shared equally and valued within a society. It is characterized by caring and is needs-centred, holistic and contextual in nature.⁵⁰

Box 3: The ethics of care, a bridge to social justice and rights

Care for others starts with a concern for their wellbeing. This has traditionally been associated with the practical care provided by most people to their children in order to see them flourish, in the context of a long-term relationship, and not merely because of duty.

The ethics of care is a relatively recent theory built on the idea that people, beyond our close family and friends, are social beings that are connected and interdependent. This means that the care acknowledged and celebrated in so-called private spaces and close relationships can be extended to the wider community and to the planet. Building a society on the ethics of care would imply a transformation of our personal and collective lives, through the promotion of caring values and mutuality. Those values would challenge the current ones, associated with competition, hierarchies and power imbalances according to gender, race, class, nationality or other factors, and that are reproduced intentionally or unintentionally by markets, policies, institutions and laws.

Public policy design and implementation in areas such as economics, migration, housing or environmental protection will be different if the needs of people affected were central to them. The ethics of care does not disregard principles of justice, equality, fairness or laws and rights. Instead it works on the understanding that considering the needs of individuals and groups concerned will promote justice and rights and not be a hindrance to them.

HOW DO WE GET THERE?

Focusing on care can provide a bridge into a more rights based, gender just, feminist world. In the absence of social protections and human rights guarantees, many groups have resisted oppression, exclusion and marginalization by and through the act of caring for each other. In 1977, the Combahee River Collective stated their politics to be based on a ‘healthy love’ for their community, since ‘the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us.’⁵¹ Collective marginalization has defined the resistance politics of many groups, yet political movements continue to depend on the wellbeing of their members to

achieve their objectives. Care has been, and will remain, a necessary politics through which to work until gender and intersectional justice can be achieved.

Building a caring society requires challenging assumptions and transforming current structures and models. Transformation at the collective level will demand rethinking rooted norms and the understanding of care, which is why an ethics of care represents a moral stance, an organizing principle, and a mechanism to attain social justice, universal human rights and individual and collective wellbeing.

Translating ethics of care into socialized care and ‘politics of caring’ would reposition care as an invaluable co-responsibility between public and private actors, and across genders, races, income brackets through a network built on mutuality and interdependence. Care is a relational practice that actively shapes individuals and society. It generates wellbeing and fuels economies, yet in an unequal, unjust socio-economic setting not everyone benefits equally from it. Women and girls are socialized to take up care roles in the absence of societal and governmental support, while children and adults in situation of poverty and vulnerability often go without the care they need.

To achieve a feminist future that cares for people, justice and rights, the elimination of violence is an urgent priority. The authors of this paper envision communities building themselves – beyond just condemning violence – to committing to a new politics of caring: all as carers, all cared for. As Held suggests, a caring society ‘would fundamentally transform the oppressive social structures that produce misery and increased violence for vast numbers of people throughout the world’.⁵² In a feminist future, the end of gender-based and domestic violence, as well as structural violence, requires the pervasive presence of care.

Box 4: The way forward towards care, social justice and human rights

A caring society should not base its organization on privileges and unearned advantages that sustain current hierarchies and power imbalances, but on a politics of care that recognizes and prioritizes mutuality and interdependence.

- Our societies should adopt a framing of care that is centered on shared social responsibility between private and public actors. Hierarchies will be dismantled by guaranteeing that care is not gendered, racially structured, unfairly distributed, unrecognized, underpaid or undervalued.
- Our communities should normalize and expect men to participate fully in care work at home – with children, people who are elderly and others who are dependent – as well as outside of it, as one step towards gender and social justice.
- Our leaders should model a politics of care that prioritizes human dignity and human rights, guarantees freedoms and is actively responsible for the inclusion and wellbeing of all.
- Our institutions should design, implement and maintain systems, laws, and norms that are founded in solidarity, recognition and respect, inclusion and emotional connection, and enable all individuals and communities to thrive.

3 CARING FOR THE PLANET

*‘Caring and sharing, among other values, are crucial in bringing about a more just, equitable and sustainable world’
Indigenous Peoples of Mother Earth, Kari-Oca, 2012.*

Decades of neoliberal economic policy has led to environmental damage that in 2018 cost countries between \$1bn to \$17bn per weather event, according to Christian Aid.⁵³ Yet, the economic costs of environmental damage are not even accounted for in national budgets or gross domestic product (GDP).⁵⁴ As we approach climate tipping points, it is urgent that caring for the environment, both within countries and globally, is made visible and valued as a core aspect of securing climate justice.

The global spread of the coronavirus has made our interconnectedness more visible and joined many individuals together through the collective experience of a global emergency. The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating consequences but may also be effective in convincing communities and individuals that we are intertwined,⁵⁵ not only at the economic and social level, but also at the environmental level.

The authors of this paper believe ethics of care to be central to any climate policies and plans arising both now and after this pandemic. We envision initiatives that recognize, redistribute and remunerate the work of caring for the environment between public and private actors and across communities and genders, in the same way that we expect it for social care. We support the global youth activism of groups such as Friday for Future, whose strikes are based on caring ‘for our planet and for each other’.⁵⁶ We are inspired by propositions like the Green New Deal (USA, H.Res.109, 2019)⁵⁷ and the Amsterdam City Doughnut,⁵⁸ that recognize caring for the wellbeing of communities and the environment as necessary for thriving. We call for a reimagining – aligning with the Feminist Green New Deal⁵⁹ – whereby indigenous communities and environmental rights defenders are recognized as leading investors and wealth creators in wellbeing budgets, rather than risks on a profit sheet. We share a vision in which the nature of our relationship with the environment is no longer exploitative but caring.

THE ECO-GENDER GAP

Many ecofeminist and indigenous ethicists have argued that care is a determinant aspect of the interdependency between communities, society and the environment, and that ‘caring’ becomes central to environmental decision making when the aim is to support communities to exercise their power and care for themselves and the planet.⁶⁰ Caring for the planet, however, is too often framed as a ‘feminine’ attitude and rejected by *machista* (male chauvinist), patriarchal value systems that devalue and erase the work of women, translating into an eco-gender gap.⁶¹ Given the current climate emergency, we are compelled to do more than simply tally the gender-differentiated vulnerabilities and effects and instead engage with an issue that underlies environmental inequality: gendered attitudes, norms and behaviors towards caring for the planet.

As the feminist scholar Maria Mies argued, ‘too often the concept of nature has been used to explain social inequalities or exploitative relations as inborn, and hence, beyond the scope of social change’.⁶² Care work, as reproductive labour, has the purpose of sustaining life. It is cyclical and regenerative labour, but it is not ‘naturally’ gendered. For this reason, approaching environmental justice from a ‘care for social justice’ perspective leverages the same political resistance to the commodification, extraction, and exploitation of environmental resources.

THE EXPLOITATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Extractivism is inextricably linked to the colonial and neocolonial exploitation of social communities and their environments.⁶³ The process often involves dominance over ecological resources and is historically intertwined with domination based on race and sex in order to generate profit or create advantage for those with ‘power over’ others.⁶⁴

Prioritizing profit – for some — is also seen in industrial agriculture and the wider food production industry, which has become increasingly detached from nutritional needs, health and quality of life. In seeking production efficiencies and profit, the time when land is left fallow has been reduced and production methods intensified beyond the limits required for ecological regeneration.⁶⁵ This has taken place often with little improvement in the income and wellbeing of most farmers.

THE UNEQUAL DRIVERS AND IMPACTS OF THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

In 2015, Oxfam released a report highlighting that the richest 10% of the world’s population generate half of our global carbon footprint.⁶⁶ Yet the human costs of the climate emergency are not equitably spread across our deeply unequal societies and economies. Climate-related disasters like Cyclone Idai, for example, hit the poorest areas of Mozambique the most, as they were least equipped to cope with its impacts. Hard-hit provinces such as Zambezia and Sofala had poverty rates above the national average (62% and 50% respectively).⁶⁷

Market-based financial measures, including insurance mechanisms, bonds and loans, have so far been largely insufficient in redressing the underlying carbon emission inequalities. Alternative measures are required to reduce the gap, such as innovative financing and ‘mechanisms for social protection with democratic participation by those most impacted’.⁶⁸ We believe that these mechanisms, especially those with a focus on social protection, ought to be guided by a politics of environmental care as well, reflecting the work that is done, be it paid or unpaid.

ENSURING CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

A society built on care calls for a global climate activism that fits with the calls for social justice and human rights, as reflected by FRIDA’s work connecting ‘the struggle for our territories with these practices of care and healing’.⁶⁹ This struggle can be a matter of life and death, which is acutely realized in places such as Colombia, where human rights activists are becoming more vulnerable under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁰ Yet this caring approach has not yet had the prominence or recognition that it deserves, in comparison to global-north, often male-dominated, technocratic policy activism.

Box 5: The way forward for care and the environment

We see a future where care is a pathway to social justice and universal human rights, and as such also at the centre of our journey towards climate justice and a greener, healthier, revitalized planet.

- Our societies should explore their values and attitudes towards caring for the environment, deconstructing the narratives of exploitation of environmental bodies that persisted and contributed to a climate emergency. They continue to rate commodification and consumption as symbols of ('masculine') power and caring for climate security as ('feminine') weaknesses.
- Our communities should ensure that care, inequality and the voice of carers are brought to the center of climate activism and the promotion of climate solutions.
- We need a collective effort to re-imagine our economic system. Our leaders should work with thinkers, activists, defenders and grassroots movements to redefine nature, purpose, practices and measurements of the economic system, carving a new feminist, green approach that advances social, economic and climate justice.
- A feminist approach will support the transformation of attitudes, norms, structures and practices towards individual and collective wellbeing and a healthy planet.

4 CARING FOR THE 99% WITH NEW ECONOMIC THINKING

'This crisis is an opportunity to dislodge structural inequality and re-frame the political economy which contributed to this tipping point.'

African Feminist Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement, 2020.

Many feminist activists and economists have urged us to consider how important it is for our survival that we redress care inequality. Before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, the organizer and founder of the US National Domestic Workers Alliance, Ai-Jen Poo, also deemed our political context as 'a once in several generations opportunity to update and transform how we care for one another'.⁷¹ Research by the Institute for Women's Policy Research on the care crisis in the United States highlights how strengthening care jobs is essential to the economic security and wellbeing of care workers who are predominantly women, especially women of colour.⁷² How critical this transformation is has further come to light given that the underfunded and diminished public care infrastructure has been such a defining factor of the first wave of COVID-19 in many countries.

In its 2020 report 'Time to Care', Oxfam calculated the annual monetary value of unpaid care work – by very conservative estimates – to be \$10.8 trillion.⁷³ Outside of this, however, unpaid care work is often framed as the 'most valuable industry in the world'⁷⁴ because it is central to social wellbeing, and to life itself. In rural areas where public social infrastructure is already sorely lacking, women and people living in poverty are doing extra, largely invisible, care work to compensate lack of alternatives, often without choice.

Since the pandemic began, there has been no shortage of proposals for economic transformation and social innovation. Numerous women's rights and gender advocacy organizations have hosted reflections or published pieces on care work,⁷⁵ and previous reports and case studies on feminist economics have resurfaced, advancing amongst others the urgency of socializing care work. Hawaii's State Commission on the Status of Women created a propositional idea on what a feminist economic recovery plan for COVID-19 that prioritizes care and caregiving, would look like.⁷⁶ Articles on the issue have also proliferated. On 3 April 2020, for example, the editorial board of The Financial Times ran a piece that argued for the need for 'a social contract that benefits everyone'.⁷⁷ In the same month, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) published blogs and recommendations that push for greener economies as well as wealth taxes as a source of revenue.⁷⁸ And yet, the most remarkable aspect of the global discussion has been a noticeable shift in public opinion at least in some parts of the world, towards the radical notion that people – all people – are equally and equitably deserving of care, and that carers are valuable and worth the public investment in infrastructure, services, social protection and income that is required to guarantee it. In May 2020, for example, YouGov published the results of a UK survey in which over 80% of respondents stated that they want the country to prioritize health and wellbeing ahead of economic growth.⁷⁹

ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC MODELS BASED ON CARE

Increased interest in alternative economic systems and models, including circular, degrowth or 'Doughnut' models,⁸⁰ are helping us also envision a new economic model centred on care, with

progress measured against diverse indicators of wellbeing, eliminating income poverty, time poverty, inequality and under-representation of different groups. Importantly, the aim of such a models is to allow a community to thrive by distributing care work between men and women, across socio-economic classes, ethno-racial groups and private and public institutions. Such alternative models are not pure theory, nor unrelated to COVID-19: Iceland, New Zealand and Taiwan, for example, have already adopted national budgets that prioritize indicators of happiness, well-being and/or inclusive growth over GDP growth, and these countries have very low reported COVID-19 deaths so far, arguably at least in part because they put wellbeing before the economy.⁸¹

THE BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Economic recovery after the 2008 global financial crisis proved to be difficult and painful, and the measures and changes advanced were not radical enough to address the roots of the problem nor to counter partisan politics.⁸² Renouncing the traditional economic narratives that prevent feminist and new economic thinking from becoming ‘mainstream’ remains a huge challenge. The notion of using public resources to care for communities, without expecting ‘anything’ in exchange, is still facing stigma and prejudice by those who adhere to fiscally conservative narratives linked exclusively to GDP and profit margins. The concept of ‘healthy finances’ still carries the understanding that public expenditure is a ‘cost’ to the state and something only the privileged should enjoy, rather than an investment in improving wellbeing and meeting the rights of everyone. For example, the UK’s New Economics Foundation (NEF) has documented how dominant narratives in British economics, such as ‘debt is dangerous’ and ‘welfare is a drug’, reflect and reproduce wider societal attitudes that are determinants for economic policy.⁸³ Moreover, despite mounting evidence of tax evasion and avoidance by multinationals and high-net worth individuals,⁸⁴ the narrative against taxing the rich in order to maintain foreign investment and compete internationally prevails in many public debates while the argument to care for people is side-lined.

Beyond these harmful narratives, there are many other barriers that impact a democratic society’s ability to envision and enact change. These include addressing corporate capture of state decisions, promoting public participation in setting budgets, and ensuring full transparency and setting progressive taxation. Addressing these barriers would support significant transformations in both higher and lower-income economies abilities to raise the standards and fulfil rights for everyone.

TRANSFORMATION DURING THE CORONAVIRUS RECOVERY

Sufficient progressive taxation and public spending are necessary tools for reducing inequalities. As Oxfam detailed in its 2020 report ‘Dignity not Destitution’, the response to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic requires measures ‘that underpin a new social contract between people, governments and the market and that radically reduce inequality and lay the foundations for a more human economy’.⁸⁵ Feminist organizations have been supporting the campaign for a ‘Feminist Bailout’ that puts ‘the health and wellbeing of our communities’ at its heart.⁸⁶ Similarly, a European petition is demanding care investments and a ‘Care Deal for Europe’.⁸⁷ Others, like the economist Mariana Mazzucato, envisage the private sector taking co-responsibility alongside the state in order to transform public–private partnerships, producing shared benefits for communities, rather than profits.⁸⁸ Rather than recovery and reverting back to the old ‘normal’, the call is for change and critically, transformation. The focus on mass social provisioning for care, with all being carers and all being cared for, is the best place to start.

Box 6: The way forward towards care and economic transformation

The economic narrative needs to evolve in order to include care and wellbeing in a new economic thinking and practice able to deliver fairness and universal human rights.

- Our feminist future means that care, as central to life and rights, is the bedrock of societies and is extended to, provided by and shared with all, within the context of a new social contract. The emotional and physical work of care as something that is essential for all human beings and societies must be shared across genders and decoupled from the characteristics of femininity or gender.
- Our communities should reimagine and redefine production and distribution systems, work and individual and social wellbeing, addressing issues such as fairness in remuneration and recognition and universal social protection.
- Our decision makers should stand with carers – including those who are low-paid and unpaid – to ensure they receive the support they need and that their care workload is reduced and redistributed in a way that is free, accessible and safe, and ensure care for people needing it. Progressive taxation and state investment in social and care infrastructure are necessary policy commitments that leaders must make to ensure carers thrive, and that necessary care is provided.
- Our institutions should look beyond GDP growth as the standard indicator of economic health and instead embrace environmental and social wellbeing as measurements of economic effectiveness. They should invest in accessible, quality, dignified, free and public infrastructure that guarantees universal social protections and care, including paid parental leave, child and elder care, unemployment benefits, healthcare, care income support, social care, community and youth centres, schools, and artistic and cultural hubs.

Until collectively we reach the above, people must continue to campaign to protect and secure the rights of carers, secure their incomes, share their work, raise their security and elevate their voices by funding women's rights organizations, caregivers' unions and feminist movements.

5 HOW TO MOVE FORWARD: CARE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.'
Arundhati Roy, *Financial Times*, 2020.

As the coronavirus crisis unfolds, we are propelled – by curiosity, optimism or pure pragmatism – to look for signs of humanity and kindness and to hope that they are the start of ‘caring’ paths towards social justice and human rights for all. While this is not a comprehensive list, these promising, caring acts could include:

- **Rethinking our understanding and valuing of work and workers**, the status and social protections we give to different types of formal and informal, paid and unpaid work, how work and workers can contribute more to social good, our relationship to work, the sharing of and choice to engage in unpaid work, and our compensation for work. In Finland⁸⁹ and New Zealand,⁹⁰ for example, employers are being encouraged to move to a four-day working week as a socially responsible and caring way of maintaining employment levels in the face of economic recession, while also freeing up time for all to engage in unpaid home and community life. The Global Solidarity Platform of Wiego is calling for ‘long-term investments... to rebuild economies around the understanding that informal economy workers, especially women, sustain households, communities, and economies; are central to the rebuilding of local value chains; and require a guarantee of decent work standards in all sectors.’⁹¹
- **Investing in and ensuring universal reach of social infrastructure and services, including education, housing, health and wider social care services, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)**. Care services should be of high quality, help reduce unpaid care work, free up time and choices for women and engage men. Analysis shows that investing in care services, such as social care and childcare, is both a green and feminist way to catalyze a recovery. For example, the Women’s Budget Group (UK) suggests ‘investment in care would create 2.7 times more jobs as the same investment in construction, mostly for women, recouping 50% more in tax revenue, and producing 30% less emissions.’⁹² Education should provide all young people with the knowledge and tools to challenge gender roles, challenge inequalities and be active and engaged citizens. In Argentina, some municipalities have also been bringing homeless communities into fully serviced hotel accommodation, applying rent freezes and preventing housing evictions.⁹³ Lastly, SRHR services need to be available to all that need them.
- **Rethinking infrastructure and accelerating the transition to low-carbon sectors and societies**. This should include greener energy and care sectors and the reclamation and rehabilitation of environmental sites and community spaces, including national parks, community gardens, returning public land to public benefit, and not only available in middle-upper class areas or to ‘elite’ users. Carbon emissions and air quality could be radically improved by a massive uplift in bicycle use, pedestrian numbers and low-density rail and bus travel options, and a reduction in commuting to work. We can already see the world’s biggest economies and cities, including London, freeing up roads to make way for walkers and cyclists.⁹⁴ Access to recreation and care sites should be prioritized, such as parks and playgrounds, community centers for social and civic engagements as well as entertainment, exercise, sports.

- **Reimagining economic thinking and practices towards social justice, cohesion and wellbeing for all.** Taxes and investment should be set through participatory budgeting and the burden of taxes shifted from labour to wealth, profits and the use of carbon. Taxes on the lowest-income households and individuals should be cancelled or deferred, as has been seen in Uruguay, where taxes on street vendors are among those suspended temporarily.⁹⁵ Businesses should put creation of collective value and resilience over profit, and put employees and their families, customers and communities before shareholders. Corporations should pay their fair share in taxes in the country where production occurs, and without lobbying or influencing for special treatment. There have already been multiple countries that have denied bailouts to companies registered in tax havens.⁹⁶
- **Creating global security policies that are people-centered and focused on peace and justice requires that women and youth need to be meaningfully engaged in developing these policies. Priority should be given to diplomatic solutions, international cooperation and inclusion that enshrine freedom from violence, discrimination, persecution and exploitation.** Colonial, racist, patriarchal, elitist and male-dominated power structures need to be transformed and a new feminist architecture created. We see the ultimate act of global care being the international community and all warring parties putting their differences aside and implementing a global ceasefire;⁹⁷ and the coming together of countries in supporting the development of coronavirus vaccines, treatments and tests that are patent free, mass produced, distributed fairly and made available to all people, in all countries, free of charge.⁹⁸
- **Defining new standards of ‘good governance’ – public and private – that are powered by ideas of feminist, collective and transformative leadership,** with decisions made at the lowest level suitable, and putting community wellbeing before individual or corporate wealth. They should be rooted in the diversity of voices and civic and political activism, and ensure accountability and collective, evidence-based decision making. Critically, they should be constructed on a deep public understanding of histories and dynamics of oppression and of the struggles for human rights and freedoms. During the global coronavirus response, we have already seen examples in terms of women’s leadership and successful responses – including in Germany, Portugal, Taiwan, New Zealand and Finland – where women leaders have prioritized quick and comprehensive actions to curtail the spread of disease, and by being clear and transparent with their citizens.⁹⁹

NOTES

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