

VALUED

Breaking the link between paid and unpaid care, poverty and inequalities across Britain



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This briefing paper shows how the undervaluation of paid and unpaid care drives poverty and inequalities across Britain, and it outlines a transformational vision for change.

Every day, millions of people, mostly women, provide essential paid and unpaid care for children and disabled, ill and older people. Yet their huge contribution remains widely unseen, undervalued and underinvested in by governments.

It is time to shift to a feminist caring economy, where all care is recognized and valued as a vital social good and a collective responsibility; unpaid care is reduced and redistributed; paid care is adequately rewarded; and all carers have a powerful voice in decision-making.

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This paper was written by Silvia Galandini and Claire Spoons.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email sgalandini1@oxfam.org.uk

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Executive summary

“The link between care, poverty and inequalities is not a product of the COVID-19 or cost-of-living crises; it is a longstanding challenge.”

Every day, millions of people globally and across Britain provide essential paid and unpaid care for children as well as disabled, ill and older people.

Yet their huge contribution remains widely unseen, undervalued and underinvested in by governments. This in turn traps many people who are providing and experiencing care in a vicious cycle of poverty, hardship and exclusion. As the vast majority of paid and unpaid care work is done by women, they are disproportionately affected by the invisibility of care. Women facing multiple, often overlapping, forms of inequality based on class, race, migrant status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability or other identities, are worst affected.

The link between care, poverty and inequalities is not a product of the COVID-19 or cost-of-living crises; it is a longstanding challenge. In 2020, this issue was highlighted in Oxfam GB’s *Make Care Count*¹ paper. Four years on, the hardship faced by carers and the strain on the whole care infrastructure continues to deepen – exacerbated by the pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis, on top of years of austerity.

The evidence produced by the many organisations and movements across Britain that are advocating for better rights for carers and adequate recognition for care, clearly shows that poverty and hardship are becoming a reality for too many paid and unpaid carers.

Those providing unpaid care and support for children and for disabled, ill and older people are facing growing challenges in paying for essentials due to the soaring cost of living and squeezed incomes. Care workers are still widely underpaid and experience precarity and exploitation, while social care and childcare infrastructure are under incredible pressure and struggling to deliver vital care.

The pervasive and systemic undervaluation of care creates and deepens the link between caring and poverty. Several key systems are failing to provide carers with adequate support and recognition, and all care with vital investment, thus pulling more people into poverty and hardship, and fuelling inequalities. These systems include lack of support to access and remain in paid work for those with unpaid caring responsibilities; an inadequate social security system; poor pay and working conditions for care workers; and chronic underinvestment in social care and childcare services.

These systems of power that keep care invisible and unsupported are shaped, driven and maintained by **underlying ‘sticky’ social norms, values and narratives**. These devalue, ignore and dismiss care as ‘women’s work’ that is less deserving of status and financial reward.

1 S. Galandini and I. Ferrer. (2020). *Make Care Count: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work Across Britain*. Oxfam. Accessed 8 February 2024. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/make-care-count-unpaid-and-underpaid-care-work-across-britain-620952/>. The paper was published alongside a briefing note: I. Ferrer and A. Parvez Butt. (2020). *Care, Poverty, and Coronavirus Across Britain*. Accessed 8 February 2024. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/care-poverty-and-coronavirus-across-britain-620980/>

It is time for a proactive shift in our economic approach to a model that invests in a feminist caring economy – where all care, paid and unpaid, is recognized and valued as a vital social good and a collective responsibility; unpaid care is reduced and redistributed; paid care is adequately rewarded; and all carers have a powerful voice in decision-making.

Across Britain, action by the Westminster and devolved governments in Scotland and Wales is urgently needed across six key areas, to catalyse a shift to a caring economy. They must:

1

Reform the tax system and make it fair, redistributive and progressive to resource a shift to a caring economy, and to recognize and redistribute the wealth that is created and sustained by the labour of unpaid and underpaid carers.

2

Increase investment in care infrastructure, and ensure that the quality and accessibility of services is prioritized over profits.

3

Ensure that paid care workers across the social care and childcare sectors are paid fairly, have access to stable employment and decent working conditions,² and that their skills are properly recognized.

4

Strengthen the social security safety net for all, including those who cannot work or have to reduce their working hours due to caring responsibilities, disabilities or illness.

5

Ensure adequate support for those with unpaid caring responsibilities to enable them to access, return to or remain in decent paid employment.

6

Commit to transparently collect data and track progress on whether policies and spending decisions are effectively valuing and investing in all care and carers.

As Oxfam, we work in solidarity and partnership with the organisations, movements, coalitions and activists that are driving change in these areas, not only across Britain but also globally – recognizing that some of the systems of power that perpetuate poverty and inequalities are essentially the same worldwide.

Ultimately, political will, commitment and leadership, and a shift in the narratives surrounding care will be key to drive transformative policy change at the depth and scale needed.

A note: As Oxfam's remit is limited to Britain (Scotland, England and Wales), this is the focus of the report, with evidence relevant to the constituent nations presented whenever available. In some instances, UK-wide statistics are used in the absence of data covering only Britain.

2 We refer here to the four pillars as defined by the International Labour Organisation: promoting jobs and enterprise, guaranteeing rights at work, access to social protection, and social dialogue, with gender as a cross-cutting issue. See: International Labour Organisation. *Decent Work and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Accessed 8 February 2024. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---ilo-lisbon/documents/event/wcms_667247.pdf

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