

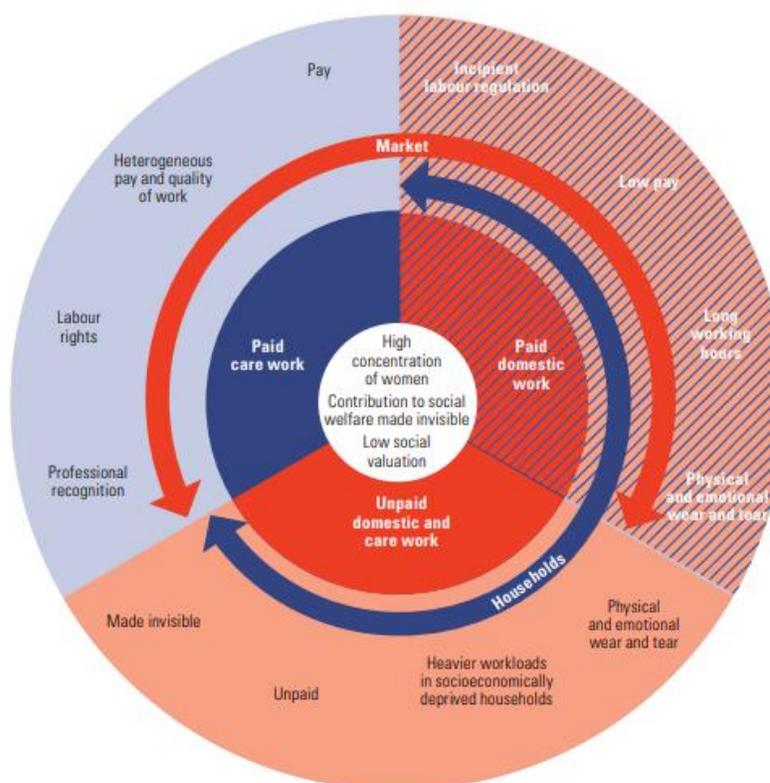
## The care economy as an accelerator of the structural change with equality

The progress towards a development agenda based on economic, social and environmental sustainability must incorporate the concept of care<sup>1</sup> to ensure a structural change within the framework of inclusive growth. As ECLAC has stated, it is necessary to move from the culture of privilege to the culture of equality, and place emphasis on new forms of distribution (of time and other resources), incorporating essential aspects for the reproduction of life, such as care work.

Investment in care policies generates a virtuous circle with a positive impact on employment for men and women. In the medium and long term, investment in the care sectors produces positive externalities on the level of education of the workforce, since the provision of public and social care infrastructure reduces educational inequalities that affect girls and boys. At the same time, in the short term, the professionalization and certification of those who get paid in the care sector increases their work capacities, salaries and productivity. Also, if the sector is regulated and formalized, pension and social protection systems are strengthened, which helps to avoid impoverishment of women in old age.

Investing in care economy contributes to the diversification of the productive structure without breaching ecological limits for the reproduction, which at the same time makes it possible to manage the natural heritage more efficiently and guarantee the sustainability of life.

The care economy



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Women's autonomy in changing economic scenarios (LC/CRM.14/3), Santiago, 2019

<sup>1</sup> Care can be defined as anything done to maintain, continue and repair the immediate surroundings, so that it can be lived in as well as possible. Those surroundings include body, being and environment, as well as everything that is needed to weave a complex, life-sustaining web (Fisher and Tronto, 1990).

One of the great contributions of the feminist economy is the conception of care from a transversal and articulating perspective in modern societies. It can be reflected in the tasks undertaken in households and communities that are fundamental for the reproduction of the labour force, such as in the market activities, employment and the provision of public services. This comprehensive approach that links the economic system and social organization defines the care economy as a space of goods, services, activities, relations and values associated with the most basic and important needs for people's existence and reproduction. Thus, the care economy comprises all unpaid work that is provided by households, and paid care work that is traded in the market.

The distribution of tasks related to the care economy, however, is crossed by gender inequality and is characterized by having an unfair social organization, where women perform higher unpaid workloads as a result of the rigid sexual division of labour that persists in the region.

Despite the importance of care for sustaining life, the traditional economy views it as an externality of the economic system and makes its contribution to the economy and societies invisible. The way in which households, communities, the market and the States solve care needs is relevant not only from the point of view of social reproduction and individual well-being, but also for the production, employment and sustainable development. The naturalization of care activities as obligations of women affects the recognition of these tasks as work. This work is undervalued when carried out in the private sphere of households and within an economic model that does not recognize it as a generator of value.

Economies have been organized assuming that there is, and always will be, “an invisible hand” that sustains social reproduction and prepares the labour force for the market. In turn, the market also presents biases as gender wage gaps persist in all countries of the region. Despite this, and facing all labour market discrimination, women continue to join this area, without abandoning the assigned care responsibilities.

Given the demographic, socio-economic and environmental changes that increase the demand for care workers and absence of the adequate public policies, gender inequalities could be deepened and the care crisis could sharpen. The current model of social organization of care, which is based on families and is maintained due to the unpaid work of women, is no longer sustainable.

In a context where demographic dynamics and work needs and formats are changing, labour demands in the sectors linked to the care economy will tend to increase. This also means new employment opportunities to the extent that these care needs are met collectively through regulated employment markets with decent working conditions and with guaranteed access to quality care services.

For all these reasons, the [Santiago Commitment](#) that was approved at the meeting of the governments during the XIV Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean states:

- *Implement gender-sensitive countercyclical policies, in order to mitigate the impact of economic crises and recessions on women's lives and promote regulatory frameworks and policies to galvanize the economy in key sectors, including the care economy;*
- *Measure the multiplier effects of boosting the care economy in terms of women's labour market participation — including work associated with the traditional knowledge, art and culture of indigenous, Afrodescendent, grassroots and rural women—, well-being, redistribution, economic growth and the macroeconomic impact of the care economy;*
- *Design comprehensive care systems from a gender, intersectional, intercultural and human rights perspective that foster co-responsibility between men and women, the State, the market, families and the community, and include joined-up policies on time, resources, benefits and universal, good-quality public services to meet the different care needs of the population, as part of social protection systems.*

<https://www.cepal.org/en/work-areas/gender-affairs>

<https://conferenciamujer.cepal.org/14/en>

<https://conferenciamujer.cepal.org/14/en/documents/womens-autonomy-changing-economic-scenarios>