

Put the Care Economy in the Post-2015 Development Agenda

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A woman takes care of a senior citizen. [Women Images]

The unequal distribution of unpaid housework — including the work associated with caring for people — between men and women undermines society's progress toward gender equality. Some groups in the women's movement are demanding the new global development agenda provide guidance, especially to governments of various countries, as they promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

Care Economy?

The concept of "care economy" was advanced by Riane Eisler, a famous American cultural anthropologist, in *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, which was published in 2007. Eisler was critical of the parochialism and limitations of traditional mainstream economics, which was male-dominated and power- and wealth-oriented, and which was established on the basis of ruling relations.

Eisler advocated the establishment of an equal partnership between men and women, and she attached importance to unpaid or low-paid economic activities, conducted mainly by women and overlooked in traditional economics. Eisler called for both the enhancement of women's status (collectively) and greater care for people and nature. She said it was important to build a more caring, sustainable and peaceful economic system, one that would meet the long-term needs of mankind. She called that system "caring economics."

Mentioned Again?

While people were evaluating the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, the eight international development goals, set forth at the United Nations in 2000, that all UN member states have agreed to try to achieve by 2015) and discussing the Post-2015 development framework, women activists raised the "care economy" idea again. This time, though, they conducted a greater analysis of — and expanded — the concept.

Clearly, the MDGs have resulted in a greater focus on and more resources being devoted to ensuring gender equality and the empowerment of women (third goal). In addition, the MDGs have played a role in eliminating extreme poverty and hunger (first goal), promoting elementary education (second goal), reducing child mortality (fourth goal), and improving maternal health (fifth goal).

However, the overall development of women and girls, especially in the economic and political fields, is unbalanced and below expectations.

Why? Women activists say one of the main reasons is because women, even girls, shoulder much of the responsibility for the unpaid housework and the work associated with caring for people. In other words, the unequal distribution of such work between men and women undermines society's progress toward gender equality.

Housework and the work of caring for people are considered indispensable parts of people's productive and reproductive activities, and are essential to people of all age groups and physical conditions and countries at different stages of development.

However, stubbornly clinging to outdated gender stereotypes continuously results in an inequitable division of labor between men and women.

When people's living standards improve alongside social development, or the government cannot afford or supply more social services and welfare, or climate change and ecological destruction cause water shortages and/or reduction in grain yields, women's burdens and responsibilities — especially when it comes to housework and the work of caring for people — tend to increase.

When it comes to employment opportunities, women tend to be rejected and/or encounter limitations in the labor market, due largely to their household responsibilities. As a result, many women have to accept irregular, unstable and low-paying jobs. The end result tends to be inequitable opportunities for women.

When it comes to income distribution, there exists paid work and unpaid work in both the labor market and in the home. The value of caring for people is neither acknowledged nor included in the national economic

system. In addition, taking on marginal jobs means women earn lower incomes, and receive less social insurance, than men. Thus, women are not equal to men in terms of income distribution, or receive no payment at all.

When it comes to social services, the work of caring for people should be shared by family members, government and the private sector (market).

However, public resources are lacking, private-sector services are expensive, an unequal division of labor still exists, and many families are unable to afford social services. During transformation to a market economy and the global economic crisis, welfare and social services, such as government-funded medical care, education, pensions and housing, have declined in some countries.

As a result, the increased burden of caring for people has fallen on women, which has in turn reduced their quality of life and prevented them from receiving the same employment opportunities and levels of income as men.

When it comes to poverty, the value and cost of women's housework and the work of caring for people are invisible, and usually overlooked, in most countries.

Even though women are being offered jobs, those positions are unstable and pay low wages. That makes it difficult for the women to receive social security and to provide a decent life for themselves and their family members.

Women's marginal status in the labor market and the discrimination against them ultimately result in their unequal and inadequate old-age security. Therefore, women are likely to suffer from poverty in their old age, and may have no one to take care of them even though they devote their lives to caring for others, especially their family members. It indicates that poverty-stricken women shoulder a heavier burden of unpaid work of caring for people, and that makes it impossible for them to escape poverty.

When it comes to the floating population, migrant women are becoming the major providers of care.

In many other countries, migrant women can only land jobs in nursing or the service/housekeeping industries, because such women have long been engaged in household work and low-skilled jobs. That makes it difficult for them to receive labor protection and social insurance.

They leave their own children and/or sick and/or elderly family members at home when they take care of other people. These global care chains imply a "care drain" from developing countries to developed countries.

When it comes to women's human rights, women seem to be seen as 'machines' for housework and the work of caring for people. It is hard for them to obtain the same rights, opportunities, resources, incomes and assessments as men.

That is because the economic, political, social and culture mechanisms are based on the gender division of labor. Women's disadvantage in the economy results in their unequal status in politics, society, culture and family. Ultimately, it undermines the sustainable development of both mankind and social justice.

Women's Voices: Include 'Care Economy' in Post-2015 UN Development Agenda

Twenty years ago, under the impetus of the global women's movement, the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, called for the evaluation (through the national accounting system) of the value of unpaid work, a greater understanding of women's contributions

to the economy, and the adjustment of gender division of labor between paid and unpaid work. (These are mentioned in Part F, Article 206, in the Beijing Platform for Action).

That goal, however, has not been achieved. On the contrary, it continues to have a profound impact on women's development, and on the sustainable development of mankind. For that reason, some groups in the women's movement are demanding the new global development agenda provide guidance to governments of various countries, especially as they readjust their economic and social-development policies, as they promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and as they realize the sustainable development of society and the equity and justice of mankind.

What can be done? First, include the people-oriented care economy — a more caring, sustainable and peaceful economic system — in national macroeconomic development goals.

Second, invest in public services and insurance. The government, the private sector and all segments of society must accept some responsibility for the provision of social services.

Third, introduce new ideas on national economic accounting, to measure the value of housework and the work of caring for people, and then reflect that value in income distribution and social security.

Fourth, eliminate discrimination in the labor market and provide decent work opportunities and friendly conditions to all laborers.

Fifth, implement policies that promote the balance between work and family, such as offering maternity leave, paternity leave, childcare leave and flexible work times, and provide families with nursing services to meet their respective needs.

Sixth, promote the end of outdated gender stereotypes, and ensure that women and men share — equally — their family and social responsibilities.

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