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Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN) International

Prioritizing care work can unlock a just transition for all

Key points:

- Calls are growing for a just transition. This holds huge potential for creating intervention and action points to stop the worst effects of the climate crisis while mitigating social impacts.
- Women in all of their diversity have been exploited and their contributions to work and the economy have historically been ignored.¹ The disregard of women's contributions is most strongly reflected in care work, which acts as a key pillar of society and economies is predominantly carried out by women, particularly those from marginalized communities.
- Women bear a disproportionate responsibility for securing food, water and fuel in many regions, so as the effects of climate change increase, such as agricultural losses, water insecurity and resultant impacts on livelihoods, care obligations will further increase.
- By prioritizing well-being within planetary boundaries over material and economic growth, a just transition with care integrated at its core can be mutually beneficial for women, communities, the climate, and all of the Earth's ecosystems.
- Investing in care can recognize and redistribute care work, as well as reduce the burden of care work for women, boosting their participation in paid employment, such as in renewable energy. Valuing and rewarding care work can also create millions of high-quality care jobs, which are by their very nature green and just jobs.
- Increasing investment in public infrastructure in a way that considers the needs of women and care workers can contribute to emissions reductions, social support systems, and help build resilient societies that can withstand large-scale change and climate impacts.
- Investment in care must address gender and racial inequities, and it must prioritize communities most impacted by the climate crisis. Equally, work is needed to shift perceptions of care work and implement complementary policies.
- Policymakers should strive to: Reorientate the economy around well-being and care, support the creation of high-quality care jobs and increase funding for public infrastructure that meets the needs of women and care workers. Additionally, policies must contribute to alleviating inequities through the inclusion of women in decision-making processes and the consideration of alternative economic structures, and the creation of social support systems to adapt to climate change impacts, while also supporting healthy ecosystems.

¹ This refers to all who identify as women across the gender spectrum.

Background

As the climate crisis escalates and greenhouse gas emissions continue to grow, calls for an immediate fossil fuel phaseout are gaining momentum. At the same time, deep debate is ongoing about the large-scale political, economic and social changes needed to accompany this phase out, and how they can best benefit people and the planet – considerations that are the foundation of a just transition.

For decades, labor organizers and, more recently, climate justice groups have been advocating for a just transition, urging governments and financial institutions to stop investing in extractive industries and instead invest in a renewable energy economy and strengthen social support systems for community resiliency and recovery. For global leaders, a potential step towards a just transition recently came with the establishment of the UNFCCC’s [work program on just transition pathways](#). However, it is essential to highlight here that the engagement of those most impacted is vital, or the notion of a just transition will be weakened.

In this policy brief, we outline how the opportunity of investing in and supporting the care economy and women-led enterprises can unlock the just transition. The care economy refers to the paid and unpaid work that encompasses education, healthcare, and social and domestic services that are disproportionately conducted by women. In this area, while women and gender diverse people are negatively and disproportionately affected by climate impacts and are at times excluded from just transition policy, they are also [providing critical leadership and solutions to address the climate crisis](#). As the climate crisis worsens, we know that the leadership of women is more essential than ever as we face the need for [transformative action and urgent implementation of policies and programs](#) that support a healthy and equitable world for current and future generations.

A just transition, women and the importance of care

Defining a just transition

Perceptions of what constitutes a just transition differ. The concept originates from labor unions and environmental and climate justice groups that have fought persistently for the rights of workers to be taken into account in plans to phase out polluting industries. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines a just transition as “[greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind](#).” Other organizations have built on this idea. For example, the Climate Justice Alliance, which brings together frontline communities and organizations advocating for climate justice, identifies a “host of strategies” for [communities to “build thriving economies that provide dignified, productive and ecologically sustainable livelihoods; democratic governance and ecological resilience](#).”

From a feminist perspective, a just transition requires the recognition, understanding and transformation of the dominant social constructs that [lie at the root of gender inequality and climate change](#). These include the systems of capitalism, patriarchy, commodification

of nature, colonialism and militarism, which reveal themselves in large-scale environmental destruction, resource extraction and the exploitation of unpaid labor.

[As Indigenous economist Rebecca Adamson \(Cherokee\) points out](#): “We need an economy that provides for people. It has to be fundamentally, radically brought back into control and harnessed for the well-being of society. Not for making money, but for making dignified livelihoods and for the betterment of community”.

To transform society in a way that is equitable for all people and the planet, there must first be a reimagining of work and the economy, the perceptions of which have historically undervalued and exploited the contributions of women in all their diversity. This is most strongly reflected in care work or the care economy. The ILO refers to care work as [“looking after the physical, psychological, emotional and developmental needs of one or more other people”](#). This includes childcare, care for the elderly, education, healthcare and domestic services that are provided in both paid and unpaid forms within formal and informal sectors. Care work also expands further to include [care for the environment](#) by those who work directly with it, for example growing food and caring for the land, which is also predominantly taken on by women.

The importance of the care economy

The care economy is often thought of as secondary to the formal economy because it is undervalued and less visible to mainstream society. Far from being secondary, however, the care economy is actually the [“core economy”](#), according to economist Neva Goodwin: [“It comes first every day, sustaining the essentials of family and social life with the universal human resources of time, knowledge, skill, care, empathy, teaching and reciprocity.”](#)

The ILO highlights that [“an economy – let alone a society – cannot function and be sustained without adequate care provision”](#), and that governments should not question if they can afford to invest in public care, but if they can afford not to.

If unpaid care and domestic work were assigned an economic value, it is estimated this would be equivalent to [between 10% to 39% of GDP](#), depending on the country. Based on a survey by the ILO of time use in 64 countries, about [16.4 billion hours are spent on unpaid care work](#) each day – equivalent to two billion people working eight hours a day with no pay. If these hours were paid an hourly minimum wage, based on a global average, this would amount to 9% of global GDP, or USD 10.8 trillion a year – [three times the size of the global tech industry](#). In some economies, unpaid care can contribute more to the economy than [manufacturing, commerce or transportation sectors](#).

This unpaid, undervalued and unrecognized work falls disproportionately on women – particularly those who are already marginalized. Women perform [over three-quarters of the total amount of unpaid care work](#) – 3.2 times more time than men. In no country do men and women provide an [equal share of unpaid care work](#). [Four-fifths of care work jobs](#) are in informal employment and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation through poor conditions and low pay. Additionally, these figures, and many included below, are an underestimation given the breadth of the care work definition as they do not include

women's environmental care work, where women [dominate in unpaid and less visible work](#) while men hold well paid leadership positions.

This burden of care work is heaviest for migrants, Indigenous women, Black and Brown women, people of color, women from the Global South, people from historically marginalized ethnicities and low-income groups. A historical legacy of racism has contributed to the [overrepresentation of Black women](#) in US healthcare and lowest-wage direct care jobs. For example, data from the US reveals that almost a quarter of Black women in the workforce are [employed in healthcare](#). Additionally, care work forms part of the resource extraction that takes place from the Global South by the Global North. UN Women reports that [80% of all women migrant workers are domestic care workers](#). This can come at the expense of labor exporting countries – for example, the Philippines has acknowledged a [shortage of up to 350,000 nurses](#) due to migration.

Care work is only set to grow. Demand for care is [rapidly increasing](#) due to aging populations, changing family structures, women's increasing employment and displacement, and health issues stemming from climate impacts. The demand for paid care is expected to rise [from 8.7% of global GDP in 2015 to 14.9% in 2030](#). Additionally, unlike other jobs in tech or industry, care jobs are [less vulnerable to automation](#). As women bear a [disproportionate responsibility](#) for securing food, water and fuel in many regions, the effects of climate change, such as agricultural losses, water insecurity and impacts on livelihoods, may [further increase care obligations](#). For example, one study in rural Australia found that women's [paid and unpaid work increased](#) in times of climate-related stress.

Like nature, women's unpaid care and domestic labor is currently [treated as a free](#) and unlimited resource that is an enabler of continuous growth and material extraction that has exceeded planetary limits. Taking this into consideration, it is crucial to integrate the care economy in a just transition which also rejects goals of endless economic growth. Instead, governments should strive for an economic model of post-growth or degrowth, which refers to a planned policy to "[reduce ecological impact, reduce inequality, and improve well-being](#)". This seeks to scale down ecologically destructive production while expanding socially important sectors, like care. It also aims to improve the quality of jobs and prevent unemployment, while expanding universal public goods and services – such as health, education, transportation and housing – which can help reduce the burden on women and those engaged in the care economy. This can also help strengthen social safety nets and climate resiliency in communities.

How women are currently left out of the transition

Given globally entrenched patriarchal structures and policies, certain types of work have been identified as being traditionally male or female-dominated industries.² Male-dominated industries are often given priority, investment and prestige while

² Within the context of this report, the terms 'female' and 'male' are sometimes used to discuss employment and industries. We are aware of the limitations of this language as it excludes women in all of their diversity and people across the gender spectrum. We encourage more disaggregated research and data that is inclusive of diverse gender identities.

female-dominated industries and labor are often seen as low priority and remain excluded, undervalued and underfunded.

Energy transition policies are not gender neutral. Like other economic policies, they often take a patriarchal view, which perceives traditionally female-dominated industries like care work as a low priority. At the same time, women remain left out of decision-making processes and traditionally male industries, like renewable energy.

Policies for decarbonization and just transition frameworks often inherently reproduce gender bias in economic thinking. Male employment is often seen as a [higher priority than female employment](#). For example, in the United Nations' internationally agreed recommendations on how to measure economic activity, investment in physical infrastructure – such as in the predominantly male construction sector – is counted as an investment, while support for the female-led care economy is [seen as a cost](#). As a result, social infrastructure projects [are often neglected](#), even though these benefit society at large and women in particular. As a result, in most countries, care work is [severely underfunded](#), adding to the burden of women's work.

Unpaid care work is a major obstacle to women entering the workforce or getting a better quality job, as it affects the number of hours they can work. In 2018, [606 million women of working age](#) declared themselves to be unavailable for employment or not seeking a job due to unpaid care work. A survey by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, [40% of women in the US stopped working or reduced their hours](#) due to caretaking demands. Women often require more flexible hours in order to work around their care commitments, which can expose them to [more precarious work situations](#) like unstable or short-term contracts. Women with care responsibilities are also more likely to be self-employed and to work in the informal economy, and less likely to contribute to social security – meaning they further lack a proper safety net and are [less likely to secure a liveable pension](#). These obstacles are reflected in women's participation in what are traditionally considered to be green jobs, such as renewable energy and low-carbon infrastructure construction.

Women are underrepresented in renewable energy

While low-carbon jobs in the renewable energy sector are seen as an opportunity, women continue to be left out. The ILO estimates there could be [38 million jobs](#) in the renewable energy sector worldwide by 2030 – an almost three-fold increase from the [12.7 million people](#) the sector currently employs. This offers an opportunity to [upskill and build a diverse and resilient workforce](#). Jobs in the renewable energy sector also generally provide more pay, benefits and stability than jobs in female-dominated work, like care. For example, in the US, renewable energy jobs pay [an average of USD 25 an hour](#), almost double the [USD 13 an hour for care jobs](#), which in general do not provide additional benefits such as retirement funds, paid leave or healthcare.

However, despite making up [48% of the labor force](#), currently [less than one-third](#) of those employed in the renewable energy sector are women. While this is a higher proportion of women than is currently employed in the energy sector overall – [currently around 22%](#) –

this reflects that these sectors remain significantly male-dominated. The renewable energy workforce is also predominantly White, with Black workers [filling just 8% of jobs](#) in renewable energy production and energy efficiency sectors in the US, demonstrating ongoing interlocking gendered and racial inequities.

This lack of opportunity for women is due to the [many existing barriers to entry](#) into the renewable energy sector, some of which affect women's employment in all areas of the economy. A key obstacle is the perceptions of gender roles, which begin to influence girls at early ages and result in far [fewer women choosing to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics \(STEM\) degrees](#) in tertiary education. These subjects are often a prerequisite for pursuing a career in renewable energy. In addition, lack of training opportunities, discouraging workplace policies, lack of childcare facilities and lack of awareness of job opportunities [further prevent women's entry](#) into the sector.

Indeed, within the renewable energy sector, [72% of women](#) work in administrative or non-STEM positions. Gender inequality is generally most evident at decision-making levels, with women in the sector [underrepresented](#) in management and technical positions. The International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates that women make up [only 10.8% of senior management roles](#) in renewable energy.

Additionally, women are not meaningfully engaged in decision-making and policy processes on the energy transition. According to the UN Industrial Development Organisation, “women are [underrepresented in the energy industry workforce](#), in ministerial positions in the field of energy and are rarely considered as key stakeholders for energy initiatives”. Women hold only [15% of top positions](#) in national environmental ministries. Additionally, while the proportion of women delegates attending international climate negotiations has increased in recent years, at COP27 in 2022 women still only comprised [35% of delegates and only 20% of heads of delegations](#). Women's exclusion from decision-making is further reflected in energy and climate policies. A study of 192 national energy frameworks from 137 countries found that [less than one-third](#) included gender considerations.

Yet women have proven to be successful leaders and decision-makers when it comes to energy and climate policies. Having a larger representation of women in parliament leads countries to adopt [more stringent climate change policies](#), which in turn result in lower greenhouse gas emissions. An in-depth study shows that a one-unit increase in a country's score on the Women's Political Empowerment Index demonstrates [an 11.5% decrease in the country's carbon emissions](#).

Current transition policies leave women out of the picture

Current transition policies take a narrow view of a just transition by mainly focusing on alleviating the negative impacts of an extractive economy, such as unemployment from fossil fuel industry closures. These policies primarily aim to compensate [affected men in formal employment](#) while little, if any, support is provided to the many women who are also affected. One study following the closure of the Hazelwood coal-fired power plant in Australia found that each well-paid mining job “[sustained up to four jobs](#) in retail, tourism,

and services, many of them being insecure and low-paid positions where women's labors were concentrated". However, job retraining programs in places undergoing coal phase-out and transition processes are not designed for those who have mainly been [engaged in non-primary sectors or unpaid care work](#). Other examples find that without consideration of gender, transitions away from coal-based economies can result in a [double burden](#) of work for women, where the responsibility for financially supporting the household through paid employment is taken on alongside unpaid domestic work and care work.

Recovery policies following the COVID-19 pandemic also showed that women are often treated as an afterthought. According to a UN review of 3,099 social protection and labor market measures in response to COVID-19 adopted across 221 countries and territories, [less than 20% of measures](#) addressed women's economic security or unpaid care.

If energy transition policies continue to ignore gender, they will continue to overlook and [promote inherent power dynamics and structural inequities](#) that have long lasting negative impacts. Efforts must be undertaken to [understand the diverse work](#) of women, men, non-binary people and people across the gender spectrum within energy systems beyond primary sectors, paid or formal employment. Additionally, current male-dominated priorities and patterns of resource distribution need to be altered to [avoid reproducing existing gender inequities](#).

Climate change will increase the burden of care work

At the same time that women and care workers are left out of the just transition, their burden of work is increasing due to the present and rapidly growing impacts of the climate crisis. Climate change will make the day-to-day tasks that women and care workers do to support their families and communities more challenging, particularly those relating to the provision of food, water and energy resources. Women will likely [have to travel further distances](#) to collect water and fuel sources such as firewood. The World Health Organization says that [half of the world's population will be living in water-stressed areas](#) by 2025. Food insecurity is also predicted to increase due to more frequent droughts and floods threatening crops and livestock. By 2050, [80 million more people](#) will face hunger, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, increasing the care burden due to higher levels of malnourishment. Additionally, heat stress affects people's ability to work both indoors and outdoors, which can also affect care work. In India, for example, women's average daily unpaid domestic and care work has [already increased by 20%](#) - to a total of six hours a day - due to extreme heat. Without efforts to reduce emissions or adapt to extreme heat, this is estimated to increase to [8.3 hours of unpaid work a day](#) by 2050.

In times of extreme weather events and related disasters, the care burden is also increased [due to injury, death and additional care responsibilities](#) related to displacement. By 2100, a projected sea-level rise of one meter could threaten to displace up to [565 million people](#), leaving women and those responsible for care in a situation where they both have reduced access to support networks and need to take on more unpaid work.

Climate change has also been labeled as the biggest global health threat of the 21st century. Nearly one billion people could [face heat stress](#), with the highest exposure among vulnerable populations, such as women, young children, elderly people and marginalized communities. Climate change is already increasing disease transmission and almost [90% of the global population](#) could be at risk of exposure to malaria and dengue by 2100 if emissions continue to rise at the current trajectory. This will mean more people will require care and less people will be able to provide it. Due to gendered roles and the care work for which they are mainly responsible, women are at [higher risk of contracting infectious diseases](#). Occurrence of extreme heat and other weather events is also taking [a growing toll on mental health](#), with women more likely than men to [suffer from stress and other mental health issues](#) as a result of climate-related impacts.

Anita Nayak: A domestic worker on the frontline of climate change

Anita is a domestic worker and widow living in Cuttack, India. Like many in the region, she migrated to the area in search of work. Here Anita lives in a 'kutcha' house made out of mud and straw with her daughter, near the embankment of the river Kathajodi. The area is mostly inhabited by those living in makeshift shelters and the municipality pays little attention to the provision of basic amenities.

In recent years, while the overall number of days of rain has fallen, the intensity of the rain has increased greatly. When there is heavy rain, the area becomes waterlogged and Anita and other domestic workers are unable to get to work - sometimes for days at a time. Anita receives four days of leave a month, but any further leave results in a salary cut. Due to water entering the house, Anita and others in similar situations often get sick with fever, colds and stomach illnesses.

Cuttack is also subject to annual flooding - which is intensifying due to climate change. In times of flooding, Anita has to leave her house and take shelter on the river embankment where she is reliant on relief food from the government and NGOs. During these times, she can't go to work as



Anita Natak, domestic worker

"With erratic weather conditions, our working days are decreasing and also our salary. These phenomena are becoming more frequent and more acute. People are saying this is happening because of climate change. We don't know what it is and why it is happening. But it is happening and we are suffering the most."

she can't leave all her belongings out in the open. Additionally, this summer the temperature soared to extreme temperatures for multiple days. Anita got sunstroke and could not go to work, resulting in her employer cutting her salary.

With erratic weather conditions, the working days of Anita and other domestic workers are decreasing, alongside their salaries. Despite the severe climate impacts already facing those in Cuttack, many residents have little understanding of the causes, impacts and mitigation methods. Spreading information and raising awareness can begin important conversations about climate change in the area. At the same time, Anita and other domestic workers are asking the government for land entitlements that would enable them to construct houses that are better able to withstand the increasingly erratic weather.

Integrating care into the just transition provides multiple benefits

A just transition that expands on current ideas of work and prosperity can improve outcomes for women in all their diversity and people across the gender spectrum by reducing and redistributing the burden of care work through investment in the care economy. At the same time, this can spur further emissions reductions.

Investment in care can boost women's employment

Undertaking care work, such as raising children and caring for family members, is a role that many take pride and joy in. In the past, this work was often distributed throughout families and the wider community. However, many women and carers now live in isolated contexts where they are unable to share the work, which amplifies the associated burden of care and barriers to other employment.

The provision of public care services can reduce this burden of care and help overcome hurdles to women's employment and economic independence. For example, in the US, providing childcare assistance would enable an estimated [1.2 million more mothers](#) to enter the workforce. This would result in [a 17% increase in women with young children](#)

[working full time](#), almost doubling to 31% for women without a college degree, with the economic benefits being most pronounced for Black and Latina women. One European study found that providing partial childcare services for children under three years could [increase women's employment by up to 32%](#) in some countries. Additionally, the introduction of childcare facilities in Burkina Faso indicated that the provision of childcare services not only improves women's employment and financial outcomes, but also [overall well-being](#). At the same time, it is necessary to take steps to alter the perception that care work is a woman's role, to better redistribute this labor between genders.

Particularly, the reduction and redistribution of care work has been shown to [improve women's participation](#) in renewable energy businesses, initiatives and investments. This can make for a more gender-inclusive renewable energy sector that more accurately aligns with the needs of women and gender-diverse people. Women can bring novel and diverse thinking to renewable energy implementation, as they tend to be [more open-minded and inclusive](#) in their approaches. As the [primary users and producers of household energy](#), women better understand household energy needs, which makes them key to the development and implementation of renewable energy policies.

Additionally, increasing women's participation in employment in general – particularly in decision-making positions – has been shown to have many benefits for the climate. For example, companies with a higher proportion of women on their boards of directors are [more likely to proactively invest in renewables and address environmental risks](#). Increasing women's representation in parliament also has been found to lead countries to adopt [more stringent climate change policies](#), which in turn result in lower emissions.

However, within the aim of boosting renewable energy employment there also needs to be serious attention on avoiding simply replacing the extraction of fossil fuels with the extraction of minerals for renewable energy needs. Prioritizing care should also include care for the environment – meaning there is a need to limit the use of resources. The use of global resources is not evenly distributed, with [wealthy countries responsible for 74% of excess resource use](#), perpetuating global inequities. Instead, a systemic change of values and the economy is required to shift away from overconsumption and towards societies that prioritize living within planetary boundaries and in balance with the world's natural ecosystems.

Ñepi Behña: Promoting alternative and sustainable economies for women

Translating to “woman with dignity”, Ñepi Behña was established in the Mexican state of Hidalgo – a region greatly impacted by climate change where livelihoods are also affected by the presence of big agricultural businesses. Ñepi Behña provides training for Indigenous women in rural and low-income areas of Mexico to help them build alternative, fair trade and environmentally sustainable economies. These training sessions take an intersectional approach, enabling women to better understand the context of their challenges, including causes of poverty, food crisis and the devaluation of their rights. This supports the leadership of rural, Indigenous women to promote gender equality, Indigenous culture, and environmental protection.

Ñepi Behña also provides support and networks for women to increase their income in women-led industries that have been historically devalued. The ‘Corazón Verde’ network connects local, traditional women’s artisan organizations that create sustainable products. The network created its own ‘Fair Trade with Equity Seal’ that assesses the production process with a gender and feminist perspective. The Seal demonstrates that the expertise of women is worthy of recognition and highlights that in addition to enabling women to contribute financially towards their families, registered organizations have created projects that support other community causes, such as care and education of children, food sovereignty and the prevention of violence against women. Additionally, the network enables the exchange and utilization of Indigenous knowledge to facilitate care for the local environment.



Adriana Walsh Herrera President and Co-founder of Ñepi Behña and Corazón Verde

“I believe in collective work, in the wisdom and knowledge of women and Indigenous Peoples where we work. I believe it is up to us to listen, learn from each other's knowledge, and contribute what we can to create alternatives that lead to a good life, for us, for women, their families and communities, and especially for the new generations.”

High-quality care jobs can boost women’s economic independence

Recognition and reward for care work could create millions of high-quality care jobs if provided with sufficient investment and support. An analysis by the ILO of 82 countries

representing 87% of the world's employment found that extending adequate paid childcare leave to each employed parent and implementing universal provision of childcare and long-term care services – such as for those with disability, illness or elderly support – [would require an annual investment of 4.2% of GDP, on average](#). Due to the increased tax earnings as a result of this increased employment and income, the overall cost would likely be closer to 3% of GDP – a lower proportion than the [US spent on its military in 2021](#). This would also generate [almost 300 million jobs by 2030](#) – increasing employment rates of women by an average of 10%. Additionally, GDP could be increased by an average of 3.6% and up to 6% in Africa, for example. The study also found that the proportion of those employed in care would reach around 7% to 9%, which is similar to the current proportion in Scandinavian countries that provide universal access to childcare.

Additional studies conducted by the International Trade Union Confederation estimate that just a 2% of GDP investment in the care economy would generate increases in overall employment ranging from [2.4% to 6.1% in OECD countries](#), and [1.2% to 3.2% in emerging economies](#). This would create up to 4.2 million new jobs in Brazil, 13 million in the US and 24 million in China. In some countries, investment in the care economy would have a larger effect on overall employment and GDP than in the construction sector. For example, in the UK, investment in care could produce [2.7 times as many jobs](#) as equivalent investment in construction. That being said, while GDP is currently accepted as a key indicator of prosperity, we also need to move away from equating [productive capacity and economic growth](#) with human and environmental well-being, and utilize alternative indicators as well. For example, [Gross National Happiness](#) (GNH) has been the goal of Bhutan since 2008, and the OECD has developed a [Better Life Index](#), which integrates multiple factors including jobs, community, environment and life satisfaction.

The creation of millions of care-related jobs means care work can also provide a source of employment for those in the workforce [transitioning away from fossil fuel employment](#), such as following the closure of mines or power plants. Establishing high-quality jobs in the care economy with stable contracts, benefits and a good work environment can help [recognize the value of care work](#) and change people's perceptions of it. To achieve this, efforts must be made to promote the formalization [of women's care work](#). While the benefits of employment creation will predominantly benefit women, high-quality care jobs should also [encourage the employment of men](#) and people across the gender spectrum. To do so, proactive policy efforts will have to be made to break down the continuing and harmful perceptions that care work is solely a woman's responsibility.

Care jobs are low-carbon jobs

Care work is also predominantly a low-carbon sector and is considered a 'green job' as it is [central to a decarbonised economy](#). For example, in the UK it is estimated that the average job in health and care is associated with [26 times fewer emissions](#) than a job in manufacturing and nearly 1,500 times fewer emissions than a job in oil and gas. Additionally, investment in the care industry results in [30% fewer emissions](#) than equivalent investment in the construction industry. International institutions are increasingly expanding the definition of care employment to [encompass green employment](#) and recognize the critical role it plays in climate mitigation.

In addition to contributing to an economy that is lower in emissions, investment in care as a public good, as opposed to other high-emitting industries, can also contribute to a [shift away from a production-based society reliant on resource extraction and consumption](#). Resources can instead flow towards more localized economies with goods and services that prioritize decarbonized community businesses and solutions. The privatisation of care and other forms of social reproductive work has not only been a driver of women's inequality, but of [resource intensity and wastefulness](#). The redistribution of care work should, therefore, not only focus on efficient use of time, but also of [material resources](#).

Investment in public infrastructure brings benefits for both climate and care

Investment in care is not just about creating high-quality care jobs, but also improving planning and public infrastructure in ways that can help to reduce gender inequities and the burden of care work. This includes public transport, housing, education, water, energy and waste facilities. Consistently centering the needs of care workers and incorporating gender in public infrastructure planning can have a significant impact on lowering emissions.

Improving public transport is particularly important as it is [utilized predominantly by women](#) – improvements can alleviate the burden of care work by reducing time spent in transit. At the same time, as the transportation sector is a major source of emissions, improving public transport can have a large impact on emissions cuts. Studies suggest women are [more likely than men to adopt sustainable travel](#). For example, in the UK, where [27% of emissions come from transport](#) (mainly private cars), women make a [third more bus journeys](#) than men. Similarly, a study comparing the carbon footprint of men and women in Sweden found that men emitted [1.8 times more emissions than women](#) due to car use.

Public transport planning needs to be done with women and the care economy in mind to ensure efficiency and accessibility. Currently, public transport systems are often optimized for commuting in and out of the city rather than for making [multiple short trips at once](#) in neighbourhood areas, as is required by those involved in care. Recognizing these needs, cities like Singapore and Seoul [introduced fares based on distance or time travelled instead of single-trip tickets](#). Similarly, in Santiago and Jakarta, discounts are offered on off-peak travel times when women are more likely to travel. Investing in infrastructure that prioritizes collective and active modes of transport, and adopting policy measures to improve transport alongside incentives for shared modes of transport, could [reduce global emissions from urban passenger transport by 8%](#).

Additionally, improving women's access to renewable energy sources can significantly reduce time spent doing the unpaid labor that affects women and children. Providing universal access to electricity with decentralized systems, like solar photovoltaics (PV) off-grid and small-scale systems, would be [the most cost-effective solutions](#) for many regions across the globe, particularly in more rural areas. This shift would benefit women most – for example, a reliable source of energy has been shown to increase [women's employment by 9%](#) in rural areas. Solar PV is also an area of the renewable energy sector

in which there are relatively high levels of women's engagement, including [40% employment of women](#) and [women-led collectives promoting energy access](#).

Solar Sister: Investing in women's leadership through renewable energy access

Solar Sister is an organization that trains and supports women to deliver renewable energy directly to homes in rural communities in Tanzania and Nigeria. In sub-Saharan Africa, over 600 million people have no access to electricity, and over 700 million must rely on harmful fuels. Women bear the burden of this energy poverty and disproportionately experience the harmful effects of climate change.

Recognizing the role of women's leadership as a climate solution, Solar Sister has built up a team of entrepreneurs that provide energy to those who have not been reached by business-as-usual energy models. This especially applies to women in rural areas, without access to grid power or who have low incomes. Since 2010, Solar Sister has provided over 4.3 million people with renewable energy products and has generated over USD 300 million of economic benefits in off-grid communities. This has resulted in the mitigation of over 1.1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions.

By providing increased access to renewable cookstoves and solar lighting products in communities dependent on poor quality fuel, Solar Sister reduces care work for women. Women no longer have to spend hours searching for wood, and efficient cookstoves mean women spend fewer hours cooking. Additionally, money that would have been used for kerosene can be spent on other more essential goods. Entrepreneurs from Solar Sister often



Moshi Mohamed Mgelwam, Solar Sister Entrepreneur

<https://solarsister.org/moshi-mohamed/>

"People in the community love solar products! They have already dropped using kerosene lamps - buying the kerosene is so expensive, so they bought solar...I am proud that I have been able to distribute most of the lanterns in my community. I am proud of my business achievements and the income that I make. Women are the people for this work because as soon as a woman gets money, it is the community that benefits. Even if the money is small, the community benefits if a woman has it."

reinvest the extra income to improve their families and communities.

Investing in care is key to building resilient and equitable societies

As recently demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, a strong and resilient care economy at the foundation of society is [essential in adapting to disruptions](#). Investing in the care economy helps build the robustness needed to cope with periods of change, such as economic crises, climate impacts and large-scale societal changes. This investment is essential for a truly transformative transition. Decreasing costs for healthcare and social security nets enables [communities to be robust](#) in the face of change. Additionally, a robust care force is critical in helping communities [adapt to and cope with worsening natural disasters](#), like wildfires, heat waves, hurricanes and flooding caused by the escalating climate crisis.

Putting care at the heart of a just transition builds resilience but also requires the acknowledgement of the [historical and continuing inequities](#) that are significantly pronounced in the care economy. Not all women and care workers face the same challenges due to the impacts of interconnected structural inequalities relating to gender diversity, race, socio-economic status, physical ability, sexuality, geographical location and age. Policy development should utilize a gender-based analysis and racial equity lens in order to acknowledge and account for current inequities, as well as to ensure investment and support is targeted towards the areas most in need.

Additionally, just transition policies that prioritize care can more effectively embrace thinking from alternative economic and social frameworks and Indigenous knowledge, rather than staying confined to models that strive for endless economic and material growth. These frameworks often emerge from social movements whose analyses are derived from people's and communities' experiences. These frameworks can build constituencies that have the potential to counter unjust and extractive economies.

As an example, Buen Vivir draws from Indigenous traditions to prioritize [coexistence with nature and community](#) and rejects neoliberal ideologies of extractivism and productivism. Similarly, Doughnut Economics outlines a model for living within planetary boundaries while avoiding human deprivation by identifying “[the safe and just space for humanity](#)” that exists between the ecological ceiling and the social foundation.

[Okla Hina Ikhish Holo](#): Weathering climate disaster through care and resilience in the Mississippi Delta

The [Okla Hina Ikhish Holo](#) (People of the Sacred Medicine Trail) is a collective of femme and non-binary Indigenous gardeners, who are working to respond to the climate crisis and build community resilience by continuing their sacred, long-standing cultural practices connected to traditional foods, medicines and land.

The collective, facilitated by Monique Verdin (Houma Nation), works across the three states of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. In this region, located in the Mississippi River Delta, [Indigenous territories are disappearing at one of the fastest rates on earth](#) due to extractive practices and the worsening climate crisis.

The collective supports the development of land in their original territories, to act as a space for community gatherings, food sovereignty, workshops, advocacy and shelter in the wake of climate chaos. The collective is also re-establishing old trade routes and co-creating future paths for trade that strengthen decentralized systems of care, build circular economies, and support local biodiversity, food sovereignty and stewardship of the land.

Within this context, the collective is renewing economic models that center care for communities and the land within frameworks of Indigenous ecological knowledge and practices. For example, members of the collective are developing land to house and care for members impacted by climate disasters. They are planting native trees to protect the land against flooding, growing traditional foods, organizing mutual aid and traditional medicines to care for their communities,



Monique Verdin, Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN) Food Sovereignty and Security Program Coordinator in the Gulf South, USA

"In Bvlbancha, we are situated at the intersection of disaster capitalism, rampant extraction and pollution, and worsening climate chaos. Through Okla Hina Ikhish Holo we believe it is crucial to protect and reclaim our relationships with our sacred homelands and waters in order to restore the natural balance and to survive current and future climate disasters. By working in deep collaboration with nature we are generating an alternative economic model that is preparing us for the unknown, strengthening decentralized systems of care, and connecting us to the planetary work that is urgently needed. In this moment - to truly respond to the climate crisis - we must re-imagine our economic models to center care for the earth and each other. There is no other option."

and holding workshops and outreach activities to support community resilience.

Recommendations

While we are beginning to see more calls for integrating care work at the center of plans for a just transition, progress remains slow and, at times, the concept of a just transition is co-opted to perpetuate current inequities. It can also exclude communities experiencing harm due to current climate impacts. The following recommendations for policymakers aim to facilitate the development of transition policies that prioritize the care economy and women.

- **Reorientate the economy around well-being and care, instead of economic growth.** Governments should prioritize the development of a robust and caring society that can be resilient to disruptions and climate impacts. This involves scaling up socially important sectors like care, while cutting back sectors that require expanding non-essential material resource extraction and embracing alternative economic frameworks.
- **Support the creation of high-quality green care jobs.** Adequate levels of funding should be provided towards building dignified jobs in the care sector that are secure and well-paid. These jobs should enable the universal provision of access to paid childcare leave, as well as other employee benefits that support people in care work.
- **Boost investment in public infrastructure that acknowledges the needs of women and care workers.** To achieve a decarbonized economy, governments should plan and develop public infrastructure, such as health, education, transportation and housing, in ways that provide benefits for women and those engaged in care work to support public infrastructure and low-carbon jobs.
- **Ensure policies acknowledge and alleviate inequities.** Policy development should utilize gender-based analysis and a racial justice lens to identify where resources should be allocated to help compensate for past inequities. To achieve this, governments should ensure the meaningful consultation and engagement of a diverse group of women, care workers and civil society in policy planning and decision-making. Additionally, just transition policies need to be inclusive of mitigation and adaptation efforts, which includes addressing [loss and damage](#).
- **Guarantee women in all of their diversity are fully represented in decision-making processes for policies on renewable energy, climate action and just transition.** As part of ongoing efforts for gender equality, governments should include women and a feminist analysis in decision-making processes for the new energy sector and for international climate negotiations and policies. Women provide unique analysis and expertise that will strengthen and bolster policies on renewable energies and climate action, analysis and expertise that are missing in current policy decisions.

Governments should prioritize and invest in the leadership of women at the UNFCCC and other international forums.

- **Learn from and implement alternative economic structures to support a just transition.** A multitude of economic structures and frameworks designed to respect planetary boundaries and prioritize the care of people, planet and climate are already being implemented by Indigenous peoples, feminists and women leaders. Governments should learn from and support these frameworks to help inform, design and implement a just transition.

About

Published by the **Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN)** International.

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Authors:

Osprey Orielle Lake, Executive Director, Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN)

Katherine Quaid (Confederated Tribes of Umatilla), Communications & Outreach Coordinator, Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN)

With support from **Victoria Kalyvas**, Research Associate, Zero Carbon Analytics