



India's Care Economy

This editorial is based on [“Mom, baby and us: Who takes care of the children?”](#) which was published in The Indian Express on 30/04/2024. The article examines multidimensional aspects of unpaid care work in India and the need for a more valued, inclusive and just care economy.

For Prelims: Childcare Leave Policy, [Care economy](#), [Beijing Platform for Action in 1995](#), [Maternity Benefit Act](#), [Female Labour Force Participation Rate](#), SDG Related to Women.

For Mains: Care Economy, Key Issues Related to the Care Economy in India.

A recent Supreme Court ruling declared denial of **Childcare Leave (CCL)** to a government employee in **Himachal Pradesh** as a violation of **working women's constitutional rights**.

This ruling brings into focus the often overlooked issue of **unpaid care work performed disproportionately by women**. In India, women shoulder a staggering **84%** of the total time devoted to **unpaid care work**. This colossal burden of invisible, uncompensated, undervalued and unrecognised labor is the backbone of the **nation's care economy**.

This editorial delves into the multidimensional aspects of the care economy in India, with a special focus on childcare and the need for a more equitable distribution of responsibility.

What are the Constitutional Provisions Related to Working Women in India?

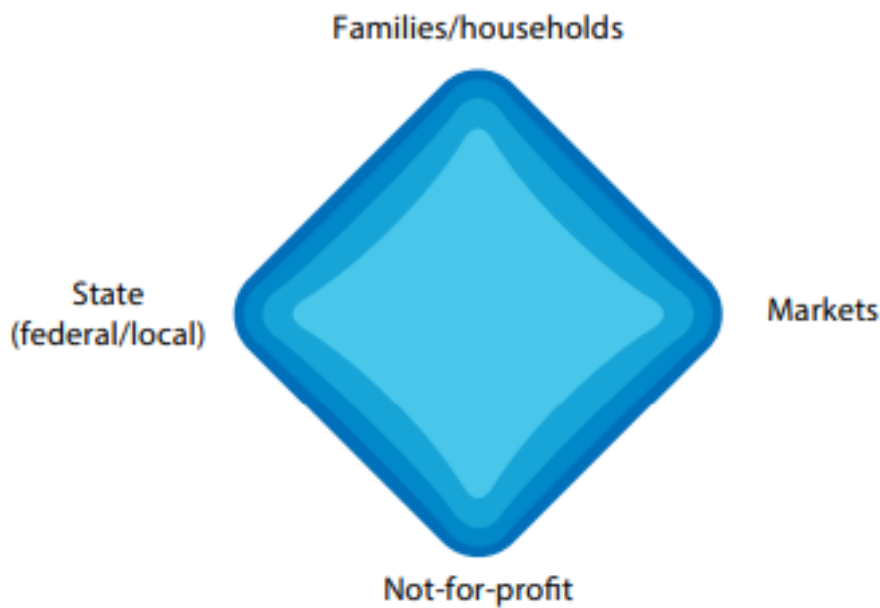
- **Article 14:** This enshrines the [Right to Equality](#), stating that everyone is equal before the law and entitled to equal protection.
 - This applies to working women as well, prohibiting discrimination based on gender in the workplace.
- **Article 15:** This prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex (among others) in various aspects, including public employment.
 - This ensures women have equal opportunities to access government jobs.
- **Article 16:** This guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. This protects women from being denied employment or facing disadvantages due to their gender.
- **Article 39:** This article under [Directive Principles of State Policy](#), have several provisions:
 - (a) states that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood
 - (d) states that there should be equal pay for equal work for both men and women
 - (e) ensure workers' health, prevent child labor, and avoid economic coercion into unsuitable jobs.
- **Article 42:** This, also under Directive Principles, directs the state to make provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.

- This translates to ensuring safe working environments and maternity benefits for women.
- **Central Government's CCL Policy:** It allows **730 days of paid leave for female employees** to care for up to two children under 18, over and above maternity leave.
 - The explicit mention of female employees as beneficiaries could be viewed as a valid recognition of the fact that it is **primarily mothers who do the heavy lifting of raising children** that extends beyond the first six months after birth (the period considered under maternity leave).
 - Men are eligible for CCL only if they are single fathers.
- **Sustainable Development Goal for Women:** [SDG 5](#) talks about Achieving Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls
 - **5.1** End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
 - **5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work** through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate
 - **5.5** Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life
 - **5.c** Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

What is a Care Economy?

- **About:** The care economy refers to the sector of economic activity that encompasses the provision of care and support services, particularly those related to health, education, childcare, eldercare, and other forms of social care.
 - It encompasses **paid and unpaid care work** crucial for human survival, welfare, and labor force reproduction.
 - It contributes to meeting **material, emotional, and developmental needs** but is often unrecognised or undervalued, leading to a **"hidden care economy"**.
 - It is different from the Monetized Economy, which is the **formal market-based system** where goods and services are bought and sold using money.
 - It encompasses industries like **manufacturing, technology, healthcare (formal sector), and retail**.
 - The value of work in the monetized economy is directly tied to its market price.
- **History:** Historically, feminist economists have critiqued the conventional definition of **"work"** for excluding **unpaid labor**, particularly the significant contributions made by women within households.
 - This challenge led to the [Beijing Platform for Action in 1995](#), which advocated for recognising and valuing women's roles in caregiving, domestic work, and volunteerism.
- **Related Terminologies:**
 - **Paid Care Work:** It refers to care jobs in sectors like **health, education, personal care, and domestic work** that are compensated.
 - Women are overrepresented in care roles like **nurses, domestic workers, personal carers, teachers**, and childcare assistants.
 - **Unpaid Care and Domestic Work:** It includes **domestic services** (cooking, cleaning), **care-giving** (children, elderly, sick), and community/voluntary services.
 - Under this, direct care involves dependents, while indirect care includes domestic tasks and multitasking blurs these boundaries.
 - **Care Diamond:** It represents the four main actors in care provision - State, markets, households, and communities.

Care diamond



What are the Key Issues Related to the Care Economy in India?

- **Limited Policy Coverage:** Existing policies related to the care economy, such as **maternity benefits and childcare leave**, often have limited coverage and applicability, particularly in small-scale enterprises and the informal sector.
 - The [Maternity Benefit Act, 1961](#) is applicable only to establishments with **10+ employees**.
 - **98%** of Indian enterprises are "micro" with less than 10 workers, as per the Economic Census data.
 - Even in registered manufacturing, 30% of establishments have under 10 employees.
 - This leaves many women without adequate support or protection in balancing work and caregiving responsibilities.
- **Limited Workforce Participation:** The unequal burden of care work often **hinders women's workforce participation** and career advancement opportunities.
 - The [Female Labour Force Participation Rate](#) in India was **37% in 2023**, according to PLFS 2022-23. Despite this improvement, it remains below the desired level.
 - Many women are forced to prioritize caregiving over paid employment, leading to a lower representation of women in **formal sectors and decision-making roles**.
- **Lack of Accessibility of Care Services:** Access to affordable and quality care services, such as **childcare facilities and eldercare support**, remains a challenge in many parts of India.
 - Limited availability and high costs of care services further exacerbate the caregiving burden on families, especially for low-income households.
 - It estimates that women's unpaid care and domestic work represents almost **15%-17% of India's GDP**.
- **Social Stigma and Cultural Norms:** Societal expectations and cultural norms often reinforce the perception that caregiving is primarily a woman's responsibility.
 - This stigma prevents men from actively participating in caregiving duties and **perpetuates the cycle of unequal distribution of care work** within households.

Way Forward

- **The 3R Framework:**
 - **Recognize** the extensive childcare responsibilities currently borne by mothers.
 - **Reduce** the load on mothers through redistribution of childcare:
 - Within households by greater involvement of fathers
 - Outside households through affordable, quality neighborhood childcare options
 - **Redistribute** childcare as a social responsibility, not just an individual burden on mothers.
- **Skill Recognition and Micro-credentials:** Create a national framework to **recognize the skills gained through unpaid care work.**
 - This could involve issuing micro-credentials that validate competencies in childcare, eldercare, or household management. These credentials could enhance employability for caregivers who re-enter the paid workforce.
 - Offer training programs to help caregivers further develop their skills and potentially transition into paid caregiving roles.
- **Increasing Investment in Care Economy:** The [International Labour Organisation \(ILO\)](#) suggests that increasing investments in the care services sector have the potential to generate **475 million jobs globally by 2030.**
 - Presently, India's public spending on the care economy is **less than 1% of GDP**, relatively low in comparison with other nations.
 - For India, **direct public investment equivalent to 2% of GDP** can potentially generate 11 million jobs, nearly 70% of which will go to women.
 - India can also learn from **Japan's 'womenomics' reforms.**
- **Technology and Innovation:** Leveraging technology to create online platforms that connect caregivers with resources and support services. These platforms could offer information on childcare options, eldercare facilities, or training programs.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Encouraging partnerships between the **government, private sector, and NGOs** to develop innovative solutions for affordable and accessible care services.
 - This could **involve tax breaks for companies that offer childcare facilities** for employees or support for social enterprises working in the care sector.
 - Promote **corporate social responsibility initiatives** that support the care economy. This could involve companies sponsoring childcare centers in low-income communities or offering flexible work arrangements for employees with caregiving responsibilities.

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss the challenges and opportunities associated with the care economy in India, particularly focusing on the impact of unpaid care work on gender equality and women's workforce participation.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question

Mains

Q. Distinguish between 'care economy' and 'monetized economy'. How can care economy be brought into a monetized economy through women empowerment? **(2023)**