

# PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN THE CARE ECONOMY IN THE UNECE REGION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE COVID-19 RECOVERY



**UNECE - UN Women series:**  
Rethinking Care Economy and  
Empowering Women for Building  
Back Better

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The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) is one of five regional commissions of the United Nations. Its major aim is to promote economic integration across its 56 member States located in Europe, North America and Asia. UNECE provides policy-oriented analysis, advice and capacity building to member States and cooperates with partner agencies, civil society and key actors from the private sector.

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This report is the result of a collaboration between UNECE and UN Women in the frame of the United Nations Development Account tranche 13 project: Strengthening Social Protection for Pandemic Response, in particular its workstream on strengthening care policies with a gender lens, implemented with the participation of UN regional commissions and cooperating partners, including UN Women regional offices.

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*\*Silke Steinhilber is a consultant to UNECE to the project: Strengthening Social Protection for Pandemic Response, the workstream on strengthening care policies with a gender lens.*

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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AFA</b>	Association for Female Affirmation
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>EBRD</b>	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
<b>EECA</b>	Eastern Europe and Central Asia
<b>EIGE</b>	European Institute for Gender Equality
<b>ESPN</b>	European Social Policy Network
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUR</b>	Euro
<b>Eurostat</b>	Statistical Office of the European Union
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>ILOSTAT</b>	International Labour Organization's central portal to labour statistics
<b>MoESTD</b>	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
<b>MODS</b>	Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia
<b>OECD</b>	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PDIFS</b>	Pension and Disability Insurance Fund Serbia
<b>RSD</b>	Serbian dinar
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SeCons</b>	SeConS Development Initiative Group
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNECE</b>	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UN Women</b>	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>USD</b>	United States dollar
<b>WB</b>	World Bank
<b>WBG</b>	World Bank Group

# SUMMARY

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of investment in the care economy for successful response, recovery and “building back better” from the pandemic. The report provides evidence on UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) member states’ efforts to secure and expand care-focused investment during the pandemic response and the implementation of recovery plans. It documents main policy measures with impacts on financing the care economy. Five main areas are distinguished: Fiscal and tax policy with direct impacts on the care economy, second, economic stimulus action in specific sectors and enterprises, including the care sector and care enterprises. Third, employment protection measures, including subsidies, especially in the care sector; fourth, measures aiming to protect the income of care workers. Fifth is direct support of paid care work, incl. pay, measures to improve working conditions, or emergency recruitment and retention measures. The report provides recommendations on how best to strengthen investment in the care economy in the response and recovery packages, differentiating between short-term and medium/ long-term strategies. It is hoped that the analysis and the promising policy examples can stimulate an exchange of experiences and mutual learning between UNECE Member States, supported by UNECE.

## Key findings

- Care services play a key role for employment generation, economic development and women’s economic empowerment. Therefore, it is logical that care – more specifically public investment in high-quality care services and better conditions for care workers – has to be an essential element of the economic recovery plans from COVID-19.
- There is a far-reaching consensus in the UNECE region that a well-furnished social care infrastructure requires public investments, and that an adequate level of care investment is a precondition for progress toward gender equality. The link between care services and women’s labour force participation is widely accepted as a driver of employment and care policies.

- There is a great diversity in economic conditions and fiscal space for public spending on care throughout the UNECE region and spending patterns vary. For example, the share of spending on long-term care in Central Eastern European (CEE) countries in 2016 was generally less than a half the OECD average. As a consequence, social safety nets and care institutions for families in the region have been weakened and care gaps have appeared, for example in early childhood education and care, and in long-term care services.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated care needs, increased the amount of paid and unpaid care work and deepened care gaps. Rapid assessments of the social and economic impact of COVID-19 showed that women everywhere increased their amount of unpaid work, both in absolute number and as a share of the additional amount of work related to the pandemic. Working conditions in the care sector deteriorated, and care employment was not shielded from the impact of the pandemic.
- Numerous measures in the emergency response and recovery packages in UNECE member states had direct impacts on the care economy. However, the economic stimulus packages and emergency support measures in response to COVID-19 so far have largely not prioritized support for the care economy. Especially care services were not adequately protected, supported, or even expanded in the pandemic response. Most investment in the care economy has a longer time horizon, which is part of the reason why it was not prioritized in the COVID-19 emergency response, but needs to be addressed in the recovery process.

## Key recommendations

A recovery from the pandemic that strives to “build back better” has to include the care economy among its central areas of focus. Responding to the interconnected needs in paid and unpaid care work and furthering women’s economic empowerment have to be central objectives. There are short-term and



longer-term perspectives on the relevance of investment in care for the pandemic response and the post-pandemic recovery process. Investment in care can be an instrument for addressing intersecting forms of economic and social inequality.

#### *Short-term perspectives on investment in the care economy*

- Emergency packages and budget reallocations in response to COVID-19 need to prioritize care. Where necessary, virements between line items are needed to secure care provision during the COVID-19 response.
- Childcare services and schools are essential for child development and women's employment participation, before, during, and after the pandemic.
- To enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of investments in care during the emergency, policies are needed that simplify governance of the provision and financing of care services.
- Emergency enterprise support needs to explicitly include care enterprises and self-employed care providers. They need to be included in all direct financial support schemes, as well as programs to protect employment and avoid unemployment.
- Adequate support for parents and all workers and self-employed with care responsibilities needs to be included in emergency measures, especially during the closure of care services. This can include parental leave schemes and benefits, entitlements to home work, reduced working time, or flexible working time arrangements.
- Redistributing care responsibilities between women and men has to be a central objective of care policies during the pandemic, to stop and reverse trends of a solidification of stereotypical gender roles during the emergency.

#### *Medium and long-term perspectives on investment in the care economy*

- In the recovery process, countries should not fall back into previous patterns of austerity after a crisis, at the expense of care and social infrastructure and women's rights.
- Investment in care during the recovery needs to strategically prioritize the physical and human care infrastructures. Recovery from the pandemic can provide opportunities to close pre-existing care gaps and address inequalities in the access, affordability, and quality of care.
- Care workforce shortages, as well as low pay, inadequate working conditions and the precarious employment situation of care workers, including migrant care workers, have to remain at the center of attention during and after the pandemic.
- Care services need to be strengthened through public investment, in the interest of high quality standards and good institutional governance.
- Tax policies will play a central role for an inclusive and sustainable recovery from the pandemic, as fiscal space is a core constraint for care-focused investment.
- Improved data is needed for "care budgeting" (i.e. assessing care-focused impacts of policy decisions) and gender budgeting of post-pandemic recovery plans. Enhanced and improved data collection on the care economy will support evidence-based pro-care decisions.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Paid and unpaid care work are fundamentally intertwined with women's economic empowerment and gender equality. The care economy' is "essential to the healthy and prosperous existence of human beings as well as to the sustainability of economies and societies." (ILO 2018a). The importance of care has become very visible during the COVID-19 pandemic and when analyzing the pandemic response and recovery policies throughout the UNECE region. (ActionAid International 2020; Care Collective 2020b; Kabeer et al. 2021).<sup>2</sup> In the COVID-19 pandemic, care work has held together the fabric of families and societies.

Care work, paid and unpaid, is mostly done by women. This is true in UNECE member states and around the globe. Because of their roles in the care economy and the low value and recognition assigned to care, women are limited in their economic and social opportunities. Paid and unpaid care work jointly shape women's labour market involvement. Women are very often employed in paid care jobs; in addition, they provide a large share of unpaid care work, and therefore they rely on care services to be able to engage in the labour market. However, the provision of unpaid care by women remains largely taken for granted in economic and social policymaking, and the relevance of care to economies and societies continues to be overlooked by policy and decision makers – as has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic and the response and recovery measures undertaken by governments (Women's Budget Group 2020; OECD 2020c; UN Women, Cantillon and Teasdale 2021).

Women's multiple roles in the care economy have shaped the gender impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

majority of health facility service-staff are women – in areas such as cleaning, laundry or catering.

Second, in their roles as unpaid care providers, women have been heavily impacted by the measures that were implemented throughout the UNECE region to slow the spread of the virus: Care institutions closed, at least temporarily, and the provision of care returned to individual households. Consequently, women took on an additional burden of unpaid care work (UN Women, Cantillon and Teasdale 2021). The impact of closed care institutions has been especially heavy on single parents, an overwhelming majority of them also women.

A sustainable and transformational approach to the recovery from the pandemic requires a care-oriented policy shift. The care economy's central role for societies and resilient economies, for women's economic empowerment and gender equality has to move to the center of attention. Care holds societies together in a pandemic. Without attention to the importance of the care economy as a whole, and the leverage of care services for women's economic empowerment, the economic recovery from the pandemic will be impeded (Sultana and Ravanera 2020).

The present report focuses on public investment in the care economy in the UNECE region in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It applies a broad understanding to the notion of "investment in care". Government spending on care services and other spending with impacts on the care economy (only health care, long-term care and childcare are addressed here), is termed "investment in care" here, specifically as "investment in paid care". It is regarded *investment* in care (rather

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