

Bridging gender and growth: Leveraging the care economy in EU-Arab relations

Casareggio, Alessandra

Introduction

Care work, from childcare and eldercare to healthcare and domestic responsibilities, is essential to societal functioning. Yet, it remains undervalued and underfunded, with women and girls disproportionately shouldering the burden of unpaid domestic and caregiving labour. This inequitable distribution contributes significantly to both gender and economic inequality. The underfinancing of care work perpetuates these disparities. With funding gaps widening, declining support from key partners, and rollbacks on gender equality, stronger cooperation is needed. Governments must build sustainable partnerships with other states, international organizations, local authorities, the private sector, and civil society. Such collaboration is critical to protect hard-won gains on gender equality and to drive progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Advancing gender equality and inclusive development is a shared goal between the EU and Arab countries, making enhanced cooperation in the care economy a priority to achieve this common objective.

The advancement of the gender equality agenda is guided by normative frameworks such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), Agenda 2030, and the African Union's Agenda 2063, ensuring that policy and investment are grounded in commitments that governments across the globe have pledged, responding to the need for accountability. Given the evolving economic and social challenges, as well as persistent gender inequalities, it is



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both timely and imperative to act now to translate these commitments into concrete policies and investments that advance care work, gender equality, and inclusive development. Transformative policies and investments in dignified care work are essential for shaping a future of work rooted in social justice and gender equality. By recognizing and investing in care, cooperation between partners in the international scene can stimulate economic growth, improve social well-being, and promote gender equality, paving the way for a more equitable and prosperous future for all.

Prioritising the care economy

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines care work a range of activities and relations involved in meeting the physical, psychological, and emotional needs of adults and children, old and young¹. Unpaid care work refers to the non-remunerated work carried out to sustain the well-being, health and maintenance of other individuals in a household or the community, including both direct and indirect care². This encompasses activities such as child-rearing, elder care, and domestic tasks. Globally, women perform the vast majority of this work, accounting for 76.2 percent of the total share³. Across all regions, women also spend less time than men in paid employment. However, when unpaid and paid work are considered together, women consistently work longer hours than men⁴. Care work is essential for the functioning of households, communities, and economies, yet it relies heavily on women's unpaid labour.

In European Union countries, the 2021 European Working Conditions Telephone Survey showed a significant gender imbalance in the amount of time spent on unpaid care work. On average, women dedicated 13 more hours per week than men to unpaid tasks such as housework, cooking, and caregiving. When combined with paid work hours, women averaged a total of 70 hours per week, compared to men's 63 hours. This equates to approximately eight additional full-time weeks of labour annually for women⁵.

Similarly, in Arab countries, women spend on average, 24, 19, 34, and 17 hours weekly on unpaid care work in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, and Tunisia, respectively, with the ratio of women's to men's time spent on unpaid care work reaching 12:1, 19:1, 7:1, and 16:1 in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, and Tunisia⁶. Women comprise a significant share of the paid care workforce as well, in particular paid care sectors such as social care, health care, and education. According to statistics, paid care work accounts for two-thirds of women's employment in the public sector. It makes up 16% of public sector jobs for men in Jordan, 18% in Palestine, and 31% in Egypt, in contrast⁷.

These figures across regions highlight the extent to which the care sector, even paid, remains a gendered work sector, mainly occupied by women. Strengthening efforts to include women in the formal workforce while simultaneously strengthening the care economy can generate substantial social and economic benefits. By reducing barriers to employment, through investment in developing or straightening care policies such as paid maternity leave, accessible childcare, and support for eldercare, women can participate fully in the labour market, increasing household incomes and contributing to broader economic growth. At the same time, investing in the care sector professionalizes undervalued work, improves working conditions, and ensures that essential services are efficiently delivered. It is worth noting that the ILO estimated that comprehensive investments in the care economy and development of transformative care policies could generate around 300 million decent jobs globally⁸. Hence, this dual approach not only promotes gender equality but also creates resilient, people-centred societies.

¹ International Labour Organization (ILO) (2018). Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work

² International Labour Organization (ILO) (2022). *Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work*. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_838653.pdf

³ International Labour Organization (ILO) (2018). *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/care-work-and-care-jobs-future-decent-work>

⁴ International Labour Organization (ILO) (2018). *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/care-work-and-care-jobs-future-decent-work>

⁵ Eurofound (2022). Working conditions in the time of COVID-19: Implications for the future, European Working Conditions Telephone Survey 2021 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. Retrieved from <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2022/working-conditions-time-covid-19-implications-future>

⁶ UN Women (2020). *Progress of Women in the Arab States 2020: The Role of the Care Economy in Promoting Gender Equality*. Retrieved from <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/12/the-role-of-the-care-economy-in-promoting-gender-equality>

⁷ UN Women (2020). *Progress of Women in the Arab States 2020: The Role of the Care Economy in Promoting Gender Equality*. Retrieved from <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/12/the-role-of-the-care-economy-in-promoting-gender-equality>

⁸ International Labour Organization (ILO) (2025). Advancing decent work and the care economy. An essential component of social development. Retrieved from: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/07_WSSD_Research_brief_RGB_ENG.pdf



Global normative frameworks as a base for action

The SDGs Agenda 2030, the BPfA, Agenda 2063, and the ILO 2014 Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy, highlight the importance of addressing gender-based disparities in care work, underscoring the importance of gender equality and economic empowerment, calling for policies that promote equitable access to care services and reduce the burden on women.

The year 2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the BPfA, a significant global framework adopted by 189 countries in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Setting out critical actions aimed at achieving gender equality in key areas, the BPfA advocates for the establishment of policies that ensure that care workers, particularly those in informal and domestic settings, have access to fair wages, decent working conditions, and social protection, and stresses the importance of investments in public services and infrastructure, such as childcare, elderly care, and other social services, to reduce the burden of unpaid care work on women and to provide support for working families⁹.

At the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69), held in New York in March 2025, representatives from all regions across the globe convened for a high-level interactive dialogue with the regional commissions to review the outcomes of the 30-year regional assessments of the BPfA and to discuss the next steps for advancing gender equality. On this occasion, dialogues with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Economic Commission for Africa, and Economic Commission for Europe emphasized the critical need to recognize and address unpaid care and domestic work as a key barrier to women's economic empowerment¹⁰. Recommendations include implementing gender-responsive budgeting, expanding social protection systems, improving access to finance and healthcare, and strengthening support services for survivors of gender-based violence. All regions also called for multi-stakeholder partnerships and accountability mechanisms as essential tools to ensure that the gains made are not lost in the advancement of gender equality and women empowerment¹¹.

Building robust care systems means aligning policies on care, social protection, decent work, equality, migration, employment and skills with broader economic and environmental goals, while guaranteeing sustainable public financing¹². The consultations held at CSW69 reinforce a strong framework for EU and Arab countries to tackle care economy challenges through multi-stakeholder partnership, key to advancing inclusive growth and women's empowerment.

What has been done and could be replicated

European and Arab countries have made important progress in addressing care and domestic work needs. These initiatives aim to reduce the gender gap in caregiving responsibilities, support both paid and unpaid care work, and strengthen women's participation in the workforce.

Jordan provides a significant example. With a low female labour force participation rate, around 14%¹³, limited childcare options remain a major barrier. Many mothers work up to 12 hours a day in unpaid care roles, without compensation. To address this, and in line with the national Economic Modernization Vision, Jordan is developing its first National Childcare Policy through collaboration among the National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), national authorities, and civil society partners. By expanding childcare provision, Jordan seeks to ease the caregiving burden on women, open pathways for their (re)entry into the workforce, diversify household incomes, stimulate economic growth, and advance gender equality.

⁹ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). The Fourth World Conference on Women. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>

¹⁰ United Nations Economic and Social Council, High-level interactive dialogue with regional commissions: outcomes of the 30-year regional reviews of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and next steps (2025). Retrieved from: <https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2025/9>

¹¹ United Nations Economic and Social Council, High-level interactive dialogue with regional commissions: outcomes of the 30-year regional reviews of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and next steps (2025). Retrieved from: <https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2025/9>

¹² International Labour Organization (ILO) (2025). Advancing decent work and the care economy. An essential component of social development. Retrieved from: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/07_WSSD_Research_brief_RGB_ENG.pdf

¹³ World Bank (2023). *Jordan Economic Monitor, Fall 2023: Building Success, Breaking Barriers - Unlocking the Economic Power of Women in Jordan*. Retrieved from <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099631312202314047>



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Saudi Arabia offers another example, embedding care support into social protection and labour policies. Incorporating maternity leave into the social insurance system is helping to reduce societal barriers to women's workforce participation.

Several EU countries have also introduced measures to strengthen care systems. Germany has raised wages in care services by an estimated 28-33% over the past four years, improving conditions in a sector dominated by women, though salaries remain below the national average. France and Italy have launched professional training programmes to facilitate the transition from informal to formal care work, while France and Slovenia have introduced specific leave schemes to support caregivers. In parallel, investments in both public and private care infrastructure, along with streamlined administrative processes, have been prioritized to better respond to care needs¹⁴.

These experiences demonstrate how targeted policies and investments in areas such as care provision and social protection can simultaneously support the advancement of gender equality and economic growth. These experiences also highlight the value of coordinated action between governments, civil society, and international partners to reduce women's unpaid care burden.

Scaling up these approaches across European and Arab countries, and fostering stronger EU–Arab cooperation, could generate shared benefits by promoting gender-inclusive labour markets, increasing household incomes, and driving sustainable economic development.

Conclusion and policy implications

By implementing gender-responsive social protection systems, ensuring access to affordable and quality care services, and improving working conditions for care workers, governments can promote inclusive economic development and enhance social well-being. The EU-Arab cooperation agenda should prioritize investing in care. This sector presents significant economic opportunities by facilitating women's inclusion in the workforce, both by recognizing the crucial care work they already perform and by enabling their participation in other economic sectors. By addressing the current underfunding and invisibility of care work, substantial progress can be made in advancing gender equality and empowering women.

Against this background, these policy recommendations can be made:

- Jointly bring forward research and data collection on care work, to backstop the development of gender-responsive and transformative care policies and evaluate their impact. According to the ILO, care policies are transformative when human and labour rights are embedded in them and cover the full life cycle of a person¹⁵.
- Facilitate exchanges of best practices and technical support for the development of gender-responsive policies and programmes in alignment with the principles of the ILO 5R framework (Recognize, Redistribute, Reduce, Reward, Representation)¹⁶.
- Continue engaging in multilateral forums and platforms, which provide spaces to coordinate standards, scale successful initiatives, and ensure alignment with international frameworks like the BPfA, Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030.

¹⁴ Hougaard Jensen, S., D. Pinkus and N. Ruer (2024). 'Prepare now: Europe must get ready for the coming long-term care surge, Policy Brief 02/2025, Bruegel1 Introduction. Retrieved from <https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/PB%2002%202025.pdf>

¹⁵ International Labour Organization (ILO) (2022). Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work. Retrieved from: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_838653.pdf

¹⁶ International Labour Organization (ILO) (2024). ILO Brief. Centering Reward and Representation for Domestic Workers in the Care Economy. Retrieved from: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/ILO%20Brief_In%20search%20of%20lost%20Rs_Domestic%20and%20care%20work_FINAL.pdf



El Hiwar project

El Hiwar III is an EU-funded project implemented by the College of Europe (Bruges, Belgium). It designs, organises and facilitates a series of activities with the aim of building capacity, contributing to information exchange and interactions between the EU and the LAS. These activities take various formats, such as policy dialogues, summer schools, training programmes, policy briefs, etc.

The League of Arab States is a central partner in the stabilisation of the region and the main institutional interlocutor with the Arab world. At the first EU-LAS summit in Sharm El-Sheikh (Egypt) on 24-25 February 2019, the leaders agreed to deepen Arab-European ties to enhance the stability, prosperity, and well-being of the two regions. Both sides agreed to boost cooperation towards security, conflict resolution and socio-economic development throughout the region. Leaders also reaffirmed the need to strengthen economic cooperation between the two regions to spur investment and sustainable growth. The summit in Egypt marked the start of a new dialogue between the EU and the LAS. Leaders committed to hold EU-LAS summits regularly.

This project is designed to reinforce the dialogue and cooperation with the League of Arab States.

El Hiwar III aims to contribute to the implementation of the EU-LAS Joint Work Programme on information and training, complementing the formal EU-LAS activities taking place outside of El Hiwar (e.g. Ministerial and PSC meetings, other political exchanges with EU-LAS counterparts, EU-LAS Strategic Dialogue).

Whenever relevant, El Hiwar III can provide inputs for the preparation of formal EU-LAS relations meetings (e.g. preparation of policy briefs) or for the implementation of decisions made during Ministerial meetings, summits, etc. Likewise, El Hiwar III can provide inputs in the framework of relevant multilateral events.

El Hiwar III also aims to contribute to enhancing the partnership between the EU and Arab countries by sharing knowledge and expertise to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Arab countries.

More information: coleurope.eu/elhiwar
Contact: elhiwar@coleurope.eu

About the HiwarBrief

HiwarBrief: New Voices, New Ideas from the El Hiwar Summer School is a publication featuring policy briefs produced by participants of the Summer School on Euro-Arab Relations.

This initiative translates the knowledge gained during the Summer School into practical recommendations, contributing to ongoing Euro-Arab cooperation efforts.

Guided by Eduard Soler i Lecha, an El Hiwar expert, participants draft policy briefs on key issues explored during each edition of the programme. In 2024, these focused on women's empowerment in peace and security, conflict resolution, post-conflict governance, and economic empowerment, reflecting the urgent priority of increasing women's participation in peace-making efforts.

HiwarBrief fosters the exchange of ideas among emerging experts while strengthening the El Hiwar network, offering participants a channel to reach policymakers and advocate for impactful change.



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