
Redesigning Cities with Care: Empowering Women and Building Equitable Futures in the Global South

In the urban landscapes of the Global South, care work remains a central yet often invisible aspect of daily life, forming an unacknowledged backbone of economic and social systems. Despite its foundational role, care work is frequently marginalized in policy discourse, relegated to the peripheries of urban planning and economic development strategies. However, recognizing and re-centering care as a fundamental element of society offers a transformative path to achieving gender equality and empowering women both economically and politically. By shifting perspectives on care—from viewing it as a personal burden to understanding it as a societal imperative—cities in the Global South can better address the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in their complex social fabrics.

In these rapidly urbanizing environments, the challenges surrounding care work intersect with issues of gender, time poverty, and economic vulnerability. Women, who bear a disproportionate share of care responsibilities, are often limited in their economic participation due to the demands of unpaid care work. This disparity in care responsibilities constrains their ability to pursue education, secure formal employment, and engage in political processes. As a result, these women experience a form of “time poverty,” a scarcity of discretionary time that hinders their broader social and economic empowerment. Addressing time poverty and promoting a fairer distribution of care work are critical to enabling women’s fuller participation in public and economic life, creating pathways for more equitable and inclusive growth.

Care as an Urban Issue

Care, traditionally viewed as a private responsibility within households, takes on a unique dimension in urban settings. In the densely populated cities of the Global South, limited access to infrastructure, public services, and economic resources exacerbates the pressures on women to fulfill care obligations. Urban environments are often characterized by inadequate childcare facilities, insufficient eldercare resources, and fragmented public transit systems that make commuting time-consuming and costly. Such conditions not only heighten the physical and emotional toll on women but also limit their participation in the labor market and public spheres.

Care-related challenges are thus intrinsically tied to urban policy, demanding a reimagining of how cities are designed and developed. Urban planning has traditionally focused on economic and structural growth—prioritizing business

hubs, transport systems, and housing—but has often failed to integrate care needs as an essential component of urban life. By adopting an approach to urban design that foregrounds care, cities can begin to alleviate the burdens on women and facilitate more balanced labor markets, allowing both men and women to engage fully in economic activities without the undue strain of neglected care responsibilities.

The Care Economy and Long-Term Sustainability

An inclusive care economy is essential for sustainable economic development in the Global South. The care economy encompasses both paid and unpaid work, including childcare, eldercare, healthcare, and education. Currently, the burden of unpaid care work falls disproportionately on women, limiting their capacity to participate in the formal economy and stunting economic potential on a societal scale. A study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that if women’s unpaid care work were properly remunerated, it would contribute up to 9 percent of global GDP, underscoring the economic value of what remains an unpaid labor sector¹.

A sustainable care economy is one that distributes these responsibilities more equitably across genders and integrates them into formal policy and economic strategies. Investing in care infrastructure not only supports the well-being of those who require care but also creates jobs, boosts productivity, and improves quality of life for caregivers. In doing so, it paves the way for economic resilience and growth, particularly in the Global South, where many economies are highly dependent on informal labor markets. By institutionalizing care as a core pillar of economic policy, governments can foster a more inclusive economy that acknowledges and values care work as essential to national progress.

Addressing Time Poverty for Women’s Empowerment

Time poverty, an often-overlooked aspect of economic inequality, plays a crucial role in the cycle of poverty that affects many women in the Global South. Women who spend significant amounts of time on unpaid care work have less time to engage in activities that could enhance their economic security or personal development. This scarcity of free time restricts their ability to pursue educational opportunities, participate in the workforce, or become politically active, limiting their social and economic empowerment. According to Oxfam, women in low-income countries spend three times as much time on unpaid care work as men, leading to a “double burden” that stymies their advancement².

¹ International Labour Organization. (2018). *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*. Geneva: International Labour Office.

² Oxfam. (2020). *Time to Care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis*. Oxfam International.

Solving the problem of time poverty requires both social and infrastructural changes. On one hand, there is a need to foster cultural shifts that encourage men's involvement in care work, promoting an equitable sharing of responsibilities within households. On the other hand, governments and urban planners need to design cities with access to services that ease the demands of care work, such as affordable childcare centers, eldercare facilities, and efficient transportation systems. Addressing time poverty is thus a dual endeavor, requiring both societal transformation and concrete investments in urban infrastructure.

Integrating Care in Urban Planning and Policy

For cities in the Global South to effectively support women's empowerment, care must be integrated as a core principle in urban planning and design. This means considering care-related needs in the development of public infrastructure, housing, and transportation systems. Affordable and accessible public services, including daycare centers and healthcare facilities, are essential to creating environments where women can balance care responsibilities with professional aspirations. Moreover, cities that prioritize safety, accessibility, and community-oriented spaces create a more inclusive urban environment that benefits all citizens, particularly those burdened by care responsibilities.

Urban planning that centers care not only alleviates the burden on individual caregivers but also strengthens community cohesion and resilience. In cities where care needs are accounted for in infrastructure, women are more likely to engage in the workforce, which in turn contributes to the city's economic dynamism and sustainability. Recognizing care as integral to urban development fosters a more equitable distribution of social and economic opportunities, positioning cities as spaces that nurture rather than hinder empowerment.

Beyond "Agenda Porn": Moving Toward Genuine Inclusion

A genuine commitment to addressing care as a social and economic imperative requires moving beyond "agenda porn," a concept that critiques the tendency to treat marginalized communities as passive recipients of policy interventions rather than active participants in change. Too often, initiatives that aim to address gender and care issues fall into the trap of "othering" women, treating them as mere subjects in need of aid rather than as empowered agents with valuable insights and skills. This approach not only undermines the effectiveness of policies but also reinforces harmful stereotypes that limit women's potential.

To counteract this tendency, policymakers and planners must engage women in the decision-making processes that shape their communities, valuing their lived experiences as essential data points. Genuine inclusion entails actively listening to and incorporating the voices of those most affected by care-related challenges, transforming policy development from a top-down to a collaborative endeavor. By involving women as co-creators of urban and

economic policies, cities in the Global South can develop more responsive and effective solutions that reflect the diverse needs of their communities.

Conclusion

Re-centering care as a societal priority presents a powerful opportunity for advancing women's economic and political empowerment, especially within the rapidly urbanizing regions of the Global South. Recognizing care as a public good, integrating it into economic and urban planning, and dismantling the systemic barriers that limit women's participation in formal economies are all essential steps in fostering sustainable and inclusive growth. By addressing time poverty, investing in care infrastructure, and championing genuine inclusion, cities can build resilient, equitable societies that empower all members to thrive.

References

1. International Labour Organization. (2018). *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
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