

Bristol Women's Commission
Committed to achieving real equality for women in Bristol

Briefing: Caring and the Environment

The current economic system has delivered the intersecting crises of climate change, ecological breakdown, and social inequality. We know that a consistent focus on growth has treated the earth, nature, and people carelessly in pursuit of profit.

Responding to these crises requires redesigning the economy around care. Investment in care produces more jobs than equivalent investment in construction, lowers emissions and creates more sustainable futures. We must value the Caring Economy, care for the earth and its ecosystems, the people who currently inhabit it, and care for future generations.

There is a strong argument for investing in the caring economy as an ecological choice as well as one that addresses gender. Investing in the caring economy for climate reason also serves to reduce the intersectional impact of climate disaster that disproportionately impacts women and families.

A Caring Economy is a Green Economy

Caring infrastructure jobs are green jobs: **the average job in health and care produces 26 times less greenhouse gas emissions than a manufacturing job, over 200 times less than an agriculture job, and nearly 1,500 times less than a job in oil and gas.**ⁱ

Additionally, investment in the care industry results in 30% fewer emissions than equivalent investment in the construction industry.ⁱⁱ

Broadening the definition of green jobs to include low-carbon and sustainable forms of work, such as care and social work, increases the economy's social and environmental sustainability and recognises the critical role care work plays in climate mitigation.

Reorienting the economy around wellbeing rather than profit would mean moving away from energy-intensive and polluting industries and towards activities that care for people and the planet, and ending GDP growth as our main economic objective.

Investment in a care-led recovery would also be more gender-equal than an equivalent investment in many other industries.

In the UK, investment in care could produce **2.7 times as many jobs as equivalent investment in construction: 6.3 times as many jobs for women and 10% more for men.**ⁱⁱⁱ

Reducing climate change would also serve to address women's inequality in the UK in and of itself. Women are overrepresented in precarious lower-paid jobs in agricultural supply chains - according to government statistics, women make up 55% of the farming workforce in England and Wales^{iv} - which are often the most vulnerable to climate change. More extreme weather events including floods, droughts, destructive winds, and changes in temperature have negative direct and indirect impacts on women workers.^v

Climate Change, Gender Inequality and the Caring Economy

The climate crisis is not 'gender neutral'. Women and other marginalised groups have both borne the brunt of this exploitation and are most vulnerable to a climate-changing and increasingly unequal world.

Women's contributions to work and the economy have historically been ignored and this is most strongly reflected in the caring economy: social care and early care and education sectors and across caring responsibilities more broadly:

- On average 90% of people employed in the long-term care sector in the UK are women.^{vi}
- Women in the UK provide 32.2 billion hours of caring (often called unpaid care) per year, while men provide 9.7 billion hours.^{vii}

As well as ageing populations, ecological breakdown and the resulting displacement of people and health issues are linked to the increasing need for care work and people being able to be flexible in changing caring responsibilities. Extreme weather impacts on social care support but research shows there is inadequate planning for the increase in these events by current leaders. When extreme weather events occur in the UK they require increased

staff hours and travel times as well as the ability to respond to increased demand for services. Furthermore, many social care clients have complex needs that require specialist skills, which those staff who can reach them during travel disruption may not have. This makes staff re-deployment more challenging, particularly if we do not invest in the caring economy.^{viii}

The demand for care work is expected to rise from 8.7% of global GDP in 2015, to 14.9% in 2030^{ix} and the intensification of work involved in caring for people, animals, plants, and places directly compounds the unfair distribution of caring that sustains gender inequality.^x

A green and caring economy would reimagine care as the key to societal wellbeing, designed to help everyone thrive, rather than just survive.

Our society is constructed upon and dependent on people caring, and it is valuable, low-carbon, community-based work that should be revalued and centred in our new economy.

Valuing the Caring Economy can benefit societies, economies, and the planet – and contribute to progress towards an inclusive, equitable and sustainable future.

ⁱ Women's Budget Group (2022) Commission on a gender-equal economy: <https://wbg.org.uk/commission/>

ⁱⁱ Women's Budget Group (June, 2020), A care-led recovery from coronavirus

ⁱⁱⁱ J. De Henau, P. Himmelweit, A Care-Led Recovery from Coronavirus, 2020. <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Care-led-recovery-final.pdf>.

^{iv} National Farming Union (2021) Let's value every player on the bench: <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/let-s-value-every-player-on-the-bench/#:~:text=According%20to%20government%20statistics%2C%20women,is%20and%20owners%20or%20managers>

^v Women's Economic Empowerment and Climate Change: A Primer WOW Helpdesk Guidance Note No. 3 April 2021: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/980912/Guidance3-WEE-Climate-Change-Primer.pdf

^{vi} Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2019) 'Women are well-represented in health and long-term care professions, but often in jobs with poor working conditions' <https://www.oecd.org/gender/data/women-are-well-represented-in-health-and-long-term-care-professions-but-often-in-jobs-with-poor-working-conditions.htm>

^{vii} Centre for Progressive Policy 2022.

^{viii} Young, S. and Bergseng, A.M. (2021) *CXC Delivering social care in a changing climate* Climate X Change: <https://www.climatexchange.org.uk/research/projects/delivering-social-care-in-a-changing-climate/>

^{ix} Financing the Care Economy In the Global South: Investment Opportunities and Pathways:

<https://avpn.asia/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Executive-Summary-AVPN-Knowledge-paper-.docx.pdf>

^x MacGregor, S., Arora-Jonsson, S. and Cohen, M. (2022) *Caring in a changing climate: Centering care work in climate action* Oxfam :London