

# CARE ECONOMY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

December 2023



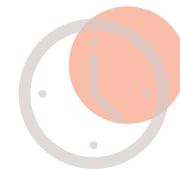
THE CARE ECONOMY is a broad term that encompasses all forms of work and activities that involve caring for others, including both paid and unpaid work. Paid care work includes jobs such as nursing, education, disability care, elder care, and formal childcare. Unpaid care work is typically undertaken in domestic situations, outside the formal economy, and includes tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare.

## HOW THE CARE ECONOMY IS GENDERED

Women are over-represented in both paid care work and unpaid care and domestic labour. **Broader gender stereotypes and norms depict caregiving as unskilled work that is naturally occurring to women.**

Gendered patterns in the care economy contribute to the devaluation and under recognition of care in both formal and informal settings. Gender plays a pivotal role in shaping both unpaid and paid care dynamics. In contrast to paid care work, unpaid care work primarily occurs within domestic settings, outside the formal economy. While both forms of care work are gendered, paid care work often relies on minimal qualifications and migrant labour, with varying quality and quantity of formal care facilities. Unpaid care work, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in cultural norms and often linked to family obligations. Much unpaid care work is influenced and underpinned by cultural, social, and gender norms, is family-oriented and localised, and whilst generational change is occurring, this is characterised as slow, incomplete, and sporadic across the region.

**Entrenched social and gender roles, norms and the gendered division of labour are key determinants that influence the distribution of unpaid care work.** These cultural factors represent potential intervention points for policymakers, but require intersectional, context-sensitive approaches. They also necessitate a focus on 'fixing systems, not women' and reinforce a need to work at structural and organisational levels, as well as individual levels of change.



Data from 2020 revealed that globally, **women spend an average of 4.1 hours per day** on unpaid care and domestic work compared to only **1.7 hours for men.**



Women bear **76.2%** of the total global amount of unpaid care and comprise **50-79%** of paid care workers.<sup>1</sup>



At least **30%** of working men in Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam have **never taken paternity leave** due to gendered stereotypes around caregiving.



INVESTING IN WOMEN  
SMART ECONOMICS  
AN INITIATIVE OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

Investing in Women, an initiative of the Australian Government, focuses on accelerating women's economic empowerment across Southeast Asia.

[www.investinginwomen.asia](http://www.investinginwomen.asia)

*Broader gender stereotypes and norms suggest that caregiving is unskilled and naturally occurring to women, and therefore less valuable than other types of social and economic contributions.*

The provision of care and the development of related research, policies, and interventions **involve four primary actors beyond families and communities: 1. government, 2. non-government organisations (NGOs), 3. international organisations, and 4. the private sector.**<sup>2</sup> Governments hold important roles in setting the agenda on care, legislating minimum standards, and enforcing laws and policies related to care. NGOs and international organisations play crucial roles in funding and implementing care initiatives. The private sector is under increased pressure to respond to care needs of employees, as well as to take up the economic opportunities offered by the care economy. These key players should remain a focus for improvements surrounding care economy policies and practices.

Research on the unpaid care economy highlights similar gendered trends, including that most of unpaid care and domestic labour is undertaken by women, and that the need and expectation to undertake unpaid care and domestic labour inhibits women's full participation in the paid economy.

**These trends are influenced by broader gender stereotypes and norms which suggest that caregiving is unskilled and naturally occurring to women, and therefore less valuable than other types of social and economic contributions.**

Ultimately, gendered patterns in the care economy are dictated externally at a systems level through economic policies, legal and institutional barriers, socio-cultural norms, and expectations which are reinforced internally through the feminisation and female-dominated nature of the workforce, contributing to the devaluation and under recognition of care in both formal and informal settings.



# HOW THE CARE ECONOMY IS GENDERED IN INDONESIA, THE PHILIPPINES AND VIETNAM



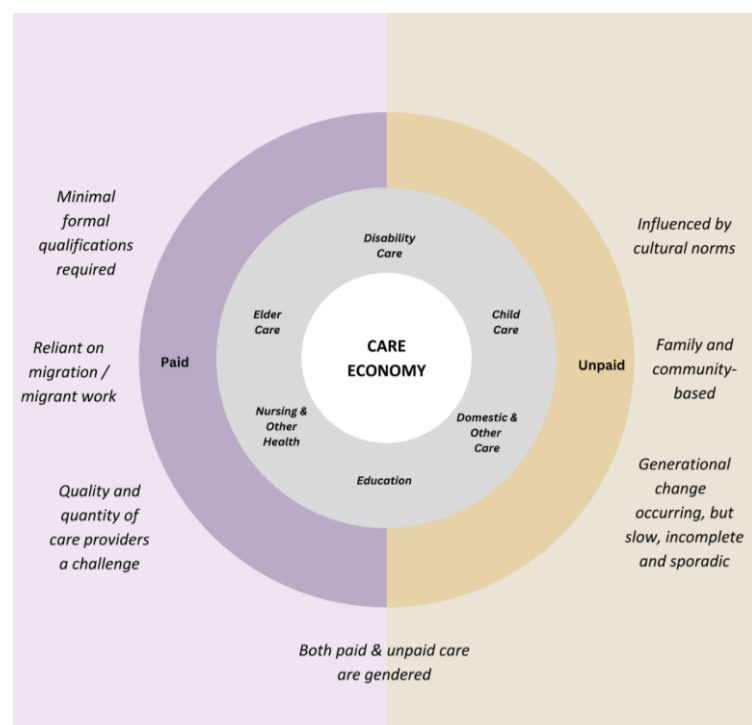
CARE ECONOMY KEY PLAYERS IN DEVELOPING RESEARCH, POLICIES, AND INTERVENTIONS

To comprehend the gendered division of care in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, it is essential to consider cultural and historical determinants. Historically, Southeast Asian cultures, although very diverse have often upheld relatively equitable gender roles, with strong family networks, women's prominence in indigenous rituals, and their dominance in local markets contributing to instances of women's high status. However, the influences of colonialism and the spread of institutional religions have shifted gender relations, often relegating women to defined roles as wives and mothers.

Disparity in labour force participation rates between men and women in these countries stems primarily from entrenched social and cultural expectations that women should take on care work.

Indonesia, the most traditional of the three countries, has a notably lower female labour force participation rate than the regional average. A lack of affordable, quality childcare services is a significant barrier to women seeking employment. The Philippines has the lowest female labour force participation rate of the three, while Vietnam has the highest.

**The gendered division of care, deeply rooted in cultural and historical factors, presents formidable barriers to women's labour force participation and economic empowerment.** Recognising these barriers is crucial for formulating targeted policies and interventions that can dismantle the existing disparities and propel these nations toward greater gender equality. A graphic visualisation of the definition of the care economy as applies to the case countries is demonstrated in the figure below.



*A broader focus on the definition recognises the links between investing in the care economy and building inclusive, resilient, and sustainable communities.*

## DEFINITION OF THE CARE ECONOMY

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines the care economy as “diverse paid and unpaid work activities that provide direct and unpaid care for people needing support. This includes children, people with disabilities, and those who are elderly or sick. Provision of care includes self-care to support people to function capably, comfortably, and safely.”<sup>3</sup>

In seeking localised definitions of the care economy, United Nations (UN) Women broadly uses the terminology of “unpaid care and domestic work.”<sup>4</sup>

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) expands the scope of the care economy beyond paid and unpaid care work to include inter-related areas such as reskilling and upskilling employability in crucial care economy sectors, encouraging social entrepreneurship for the benefit of vulnerable groups, and transitioning to smart cities and homes. This broader focus recognises the links between investing in the care economy and building inclusive, resilient, and sustainable communities. Through combining this with developing a strong foundation of childcare, aged care, disability care, and other types of traditional care work, ASEAN consequently seeks to enhance quality of life across the region by providing better access to quality care.<sup>5</sup> Of note in these localised definitions is the absence of explicit references to disability care, involving caring for those with physical and intellectual impairments, and other forms of care such as respite care and personal care.<sup>5</sup>

1 ILO (2018)

2 Global Institute for Women in Leadership (GIWL). (2023). Initial Landscape Report - Care Economy Investing in Women: Women in Inclusive Sustainable Economic Recovery (IWISER) across Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia. Canberra, Australian National University.

3 Asia Foundation. (2023). Advancing the care economy in Asia and the Pacific: A regional overview. San Francisco: Asia Foundation and International Labour Organisation (ILO). (2018). Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work. Geneva: ILO.

4 See: UN Women's Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016 and UN Women's Policy Brief No. 5 on Redistributing unpaid care and sustaining quality care service.

5 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). (2021). ASEAN Strategic Framework for the Care Economy 2021-2025. Jakarta: ASEAN.