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**Working Paper**

## The climate-care nexus: Input to the study on care and support, pursuant to HRC resolution 54/6

UNRISD Working Paper, No. 2025-01

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva

*Suggested Citation:* Ackzell, Anna Eknor; Cos-Montiel, Francisco; Estrada, María; Vélez, Fabio (2025) : The climate-care nexus: Input to the study on care and support, pursuant to HRC resolution 54/6, UNRISD Working Paper, No. 2025-01, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/312928>

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WORKING PAPER 2025-01

# THE CLIMATE-CARE NEXUS

Input to the Study on Care and Support,  
Pursuant to HRC Resolution 54/6

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**UNRISD**

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February 2025

This paper was prepared in response to the call for input *Human Rights Council resolution 54/6 on the centrality of care and support from a human rights perspective*, issued by OHCHR. The report was originally published on 30 January 2025 on [OHCHR' site](https://www.ohchr.org/).

UNRISD working papers are posted online to stimulate discussion and critical comment.

Suggested citation: Eknor Ackzell, Anna, Francisco Cos-Montiel, María Estrada and Fabio Vélez. 2025. *The Climate-Care Nexus. Input to the study on care and support, pursuant to HRC resolution 54/6*. Working paper 2025-01. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

## Summary

There is a growing scientific consensus that climate change induced crisis and environmental degradation impact males and females differently and exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities in the world of work. One main area of this gendered impact is paid and unpaid care work, which is provided for by women and girls to a greater extent than men and boys. The care burden increases during climate change induced crisis such as heat waves, natural catastrophes and overall environmental degradation, including drought, increased periods of flooding and desertification. Climate change induced crisis also taxes the health care system, which is largely a feminized labour sector.

When we recognize that the “care crisis” is aggravated by the climate crisis and environmental degradation, it is clear that the intersection of the two has a more severe impact for groups of people that are also affected by other categories of difference in their individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements and localities. In this way, the impact of climate change as well as the care crisis needs to be understood from an intersectional perspective in order to avoid exacerbating the often-concealed interests of less powerful parties, benefitting hegemonic interests.

If until a few years ago the climate and care agendas did not seem to find points of contact, they are now beginning to be thought of as inseparable. Indeed, if the care crisis warned of the necessary *interdependence* of people and generations for the sustainability of societies, and the climate and environmental crisis warned of the inexorable *eco-dependence* that links us with our planet and with all forms of life, we now know that the care of life in general is a necessary condition for its sustainability.

This note is a call for action for policymakers and the research community to engage with the topic of the climate-care nexus and examine its impact on the human rights of unpaid and paid caregivers, recipients of care and self-care of caregivers and recipients of care, including those who are women and girls, persons with disabilities, children and older people.

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## The intersection between climate change and care

There is a growing scientific consensus that climate change induced crisis and environmental degradation impact males and females differently and exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities in the world of work (ILO, 2022: 1). One main area of this gendered impact is paid and unpaid care work, which is provided for by women and girls to a greater extent than men and boys, due to that the care burdens increase during climate change induced crisis such as heat waves, natural catastrophes and overall environmental degradation, including drought, increased periods of flooding and desertification. Climate change induced crisis also taxes the health care system, which is largely a feminized labour sector.

Care work is fundamental for the reproduction and quality of life. Around the world, care is primarily provided by women and girls and unequal distribution of unpaid care work within the household persists. According to the ILO, women spend three times as much time on this work as men do. The contributions of unpaid care and domestic work worldwide are equivalent to approximately 9% of global GDP, or US\$11 trillion. Women do about three-quarters (76,2%) of this work (ILO, 2018). However, it should be noted that even though care is carried out by females more than males, males also provide care and are also, although slighter, affected by the climate-care nexus.

The climate-gender intersection has, unlike the climate-care intersection, received considerable attention from policy makers and has been the subject of more extensive research than the climate-care nexus. Studies on the climate-care nexus are scarce and we are just seeing the beginning of an increase in recent research carried out on the topic (MacGregor et al., 2022; UN Women, 2023).

When we recognize that the “care crisis”<sup>1</sup> is aggravated by the climate crisis and environmental degradation, it is clear that the intersection of the two has a more severe impact for groups of people that are also affected by other categories of difference in their individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements and localities. People living in rural areas are typically more affected by climate change induced crisis and environmental degradation than people living in urban areas, as are poor people and people living in the Global South (MacGregor *et al.*, 2022). In this way, the impact of climate change as well as the care crisis needs to be understood from an intersectional<sup>2</sup> perspective in order to avoid exacerbating the often-concealed interests of less

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<sup>1</sup> As Fraser points out : “the ‘crisis of care’ (...) refers to the pressures from several directions that are currently squeezing a key set of social capacities: those available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and Family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally. Historically, these processes of ‘social reproduction’ have been cast as women’s work, although men have always done some of it too. Comprising both affective and material labor , and often performed without pay, it is indispensable to society. Without it there could be no culture, no economy, no political organization. No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can last for long” (2016: 99).

<sup>2</sup> The concept of intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), in response to the issue of black women in the US falling between the cracks of the feminist as well as antiracist discourse due to being both women and black, and as a result held an impossible subjectivity marked by ethnicity as well as gender. In order to understand their experiences, Crenshaw therefore called for an intersectional perspective fit to consider multiple structures of oppression simultaneously. In this vein, this note follows the understanding of the concept as the interaction between gender, age, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power. In focus for intersectionality is thus the contextual interplay between different positionalities such as age and gender and its outcome in terms of power and the lack of the same. Different structures of power in this way connect in a multitude of combinations, and it is therefore not meaningful to consider one position of power solitarily.

powerful parties, benefitting hegemonic interests<sup>3</sup>. It is no coincidence that climate actions are being designed to consider a “just transition” framework. If, as defined by the ILO, a just transition aims to “green the economy in the fairest and most inclusive way possible for all stakeholders, including women, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind” (ILO, 2022: 3), the application of an intersectional lens is key to “leaving no woman behind.”

## Caring for people and the planet

If until a few years ago the climate and care agendas did not seem to find points of contact, they are now beginning to be thought of as inseparable. Indeed, if the care crisis warned of the necessary *interdependence* of people and generations for the sustainability of societies, and the climate and environmental crisis warned of the inexorable *eco-dependence* that links us with our planet and with all forms of life, we now know that the care of life in general is a necessary condition for its sustainability. There is no life without care and, consequently, there is no future without care (Camps, 2021).

This reconsideration of care has had a direct impact when it comes to naming and *expanding* the notion of care. There is a shift from anthropocentric care, centered on people, to care that incorporates the care and sustainability of life in general. This is demonstrated by it becoming increasingly more common to come across terminology such as “care for people and the planet” in publications by UN agencies, Civil Society and Academia, as well as the term “care societies” being defined as including “self-care, care of people, those they care for and the planet” (Fraga, 2022).

However, the clarity that this widened understanding of care entails has not been accompanied by a consistent conceptual or political development, which needs to happen to realize the conceptual design of care societies and shaping the policies necessary to materialize them. The few and recent publications that have attempted to systematize this have stressed that the intersection has been more nominal than conceptual (MacGregor *et al.*, 2022; UN Women, 2023). Thus, there is a need for more research and political action in order to achieve a world where care is understood in its interplay with climate change and environmental degradation and society is shaped accordingly.

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<sup>3</sup> Until approximately the seventies of the 20th century, the prevailing current of feminism, which dominated academic discourse and social policies, took into account a homogeneous model of women (white, urban, middle or upper class and Western women), which was considered universal and, therefore, applicable to any context. This “second wave” or hegemonic feminism has subsequently been enriched by the views of the so-called “third wave” feminism, decolonial or peripheral.

## From the 5Rs of care to the 7Rs of care

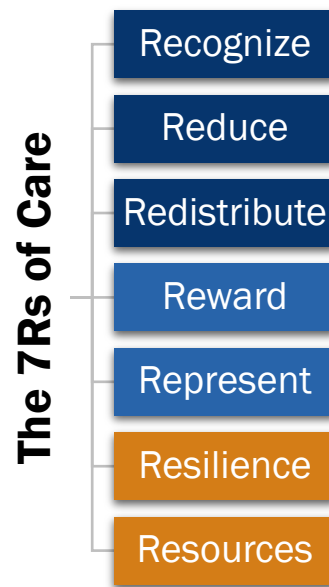


Figure 1. The 7Rs of Care

It is striking that the compass of the 5Rs of care<sup>4</sup> (recognize, reduce, redistribute, reward and represent), which has received broad consensus, has not been revamped or expanded with any new specific R about “care for the planet” (MacGregor *et al.*, 2022: 70). A recent paper by UN Women (2023) underlined the importance of expanding the framework: “The global discourse on care work has shifted from a 3Rs framework to a 5Rs framework whereby the recognition, reduction and redistribution of *unpaid* care work are complemented by reward and representation of *paid* care work. The resilience of care systems in the face of global crises such as climate change and environmental degradation could also be included in the framework, as well as the resources needed to support and finance its implementation” (UN Women, 2023: 6). The incorporation of resilience and resources into the 5Rs model, and thereby expanding it to the 7Rs model (Figure 1) is important to highlight the impact that the climate and environment has on the issue of care and to deepen our understanding of care.

## Transitioning to a green and equitable economy

The transition to a green and equitable economy requires fundamental changes in the way our economies and societies are organized, produced and reproduced. A key component of these changes is the redesign of financial and fiscal policies. These policies determine, for example, how the public sector invests in physical and social infrastructure, how governments use taxes

<sup>4</sup> This refers to the ILO’s “5R Framework for Decent Care Work” which includes the traditional 3R recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work, and also reward and represent paid care work by promoting decent work for care workers and guaranteeing their representation, social dialogue and collective bargaining. This framework helps identify policy areas and design policy measures as means to achieve gender equality following the Sustainable Development Goals, and to promote the rights and wellbeing of care providers and recipients.



and subsidies to support or impede certain types of economic activities, as well as how the financial system provides credit to the public. Macro financial policies therefore have important implications for gender equality, our well-being and the environmental effects of our economies.

When evaluating advances in this area, feminist studies frequently agree that these policies do not satisfactorily measure the right things, and do not usually consider the central role that care plays in the functioning of our economies and societies. Care is largely not taken into account in decision-making in regard to financial and fiscal matters (Nikolaidi, 2022). This ignores that care work is the work that makes all other jobs possible, and that most decarbonization policies (in the energy and technology sectors, etc.) run the risk of exacerbating gender inequalities. Financial policies must include a care-climate nexus perspective in a meaningful way to adequately address both the care and climate crisis in order to manage the economic challenges these carry.

## **Redistribution and normative change**

Crisis situations have been noted to provide an opportunity to redefine the gender roles and burdens associated with different types of work, promoting a more equitable arrangement between women and men. After a climate induced extreme event, gender specific impacts may exacerbate gendered relations and responsibilities, while new obligations arise. As an example, (women's) duties and workloads relating to climate change adaptation and mitigation may increase if new tasks are added on to existing ones. Conversely, the distribution of specific tasks may become more equal if work associated with that task is re-coded from being feminine to becoming masculine meaning that men assume women's tasks and vice versa as happened in a severe drought in Cambodia when women and men reinterpreted, shifted and shared tasks and duties in agriculture to overcome shared burdens and difficulties. A major crisis may reinforce gender-based disadvantages but, on the contrary, it may also, as discussed above, entail negotiations and alterations in apparently fixed gender relations thus implying a destabilization of gender and an opening for social change” (Jerneck , 2018: 12).

A normative change regarding the feminization of care is needed to facilitate redistribution of care within households and to open up feminized paid care sectors to males. Redistributive policies addressing these imbalances are vital and include implementing programs that address gender socialization through schools and parenting initiatives, and training programmes for teachers and health care workers, amongst others. Including men and boys in this process is crucial for its success as improved equality in domestic and care work cannot be achieved if it is not accompanied by greater co-responsibility on the part of men and boys.

## Going forward

This note is a call for action for policymakers and the research community to engage with the topic of the climate-care nexus and examine its impact on the human rights of unpaid and paid caregivers, recipients of care and self-care of caregivers and recipients of care, including those who are women and girls, persons with disabilities, children and older people. To better understand the impact of the climate-care nexus and what actions are called for in order to ensure gender equality as well as good quality care for all people and the planet, the research community and policy makers need to take urgent action on the following issues:

### **1. Redefine the concept of care to integrate its interconnectedness with climate change and environmental degradation.**

- a. Define the concept of care, its scope, acknowledging the variety of definitions.
- b. Apply a 7Rs perspective to care in order to include care for the planet in the concept of care as well as people.
- c. Apply a solid intersectional lens to analyse the impact of the climate-gender nexus in order to benefit all people, including the most vulnerable.

### **2. Commit to develop the body of research on the climate-care nexus.**

- a. Promote research that highlights the importance of caring for people and the planet in tandem. Its inseparable character is just beginning to be recognized and politically conceptualized and this needs to be closer examined to better understand its impact on our societies and people.
- b. Increase research and bottom-up case studies with the aim of making the climate-care intersection visible and expanding the knowledge base.
- c. Commit to obtaining data and developing financing and fiscal policies for a just transition with a gender perspective focused on care. The gap has barely been examined so far and data is needed to enable political and socioeconomic change.
- d. Enhance data collection methods, such as time-use surveys, to better capture the extensive scope and impact of care work, particularly in the contexts of climate change and social inequalities.

### **3. Support strategies, programs and legal framework development that serve to recognize, reduce, redistribute, reward and represent care, with particular attention paid to simultaneously consider the interconnected issues of resilience and resources from an environmental and climate change point of view (the 7Rs of care). This includes but is not limited to:**

- a. Promote and support funding for normative change programs focussing on achieving redistribution of care between males and females of all ages while maintaining a climate lens.
- b. Foster community engagement by integrating grassroots and local care initiatives into our climate resilience strategies, thereby strengthening community-based responses and sustainability efforts, including capacity building.

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