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November 2025

Advancing Economic and Social Rights in Pakistan through Care-Inclusive Social Protection

Towards Gender-Just Governance



Imprint

Publisher

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Nepal Office
Lalitpur Metropolitan City, Ward 2, Sanepa
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Asia Pacific Department

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Printing and production

Fuzion Art and Design, Nepal
AGLOW Communication, Pakistan

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November, 2025

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Executive Summary

The realisation of economic and social rights lies at the heart of building an inclusive, just, and equitable society. In Pakistan, however, the advancement of these rights remains deeply constrained by structural and institutional barriers that perpetuate systemic and gendered injustices. A critical dimension of this inequality is reflected in women's disproportionate contribution to care, care work, and the care economy. Yet, the exclusion of care from policy and governance frameworks is not merely a social omission, it is a political and governance issue that reflects how power, value, and accountability are distributed within society. Embedding care into national policy, planning, and budgeting therefore requires more than service delivery or welfare measures; it demands a gender-transformative governance approach that redefines care as a public responsibility, challenges patriarchal power structures, and ensures that governance systems themselves become vehicles of redistribution and equity.

As a reflection of these inequalities, women in Pakistan spend nearly eleven times more hours than men on unpaid care and domestic work, among the highest disparities in South Asia, leaving them time-poor and excluded from education, formal employment, and public life. Paid care work, meanwhile, remains largely informal, unregulated, and undervalued. Despite large-scale initiatives such as the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Pakistan's social protection system fails to fully recognise, reduce, or redistribute care responsibilities, leaving structural

inequalities intact. This paper argues for embedding care within Pakistan's social protection architecture through a gender-transformative governance lens that challenges patriarchal power structures and redefines care as both a public good and an economic sector. Drawing on the ILO's 5R Framework—Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, and Represent—the analysis identifies reforms necessary to institutionalise care within national accounts, data systems, infrastructure investments, labour protections, and financing mechanisms. Comparative practices from Asia and Africa, among other regions, demonstrate that care-inclusive systems not only strengthen gender equality but also generate employment, reduce poverty, and support sustainable development.

The policy recommendations highlight the need to: (i) **institutionalise** a National Care Policy and Roadmap, (ii) **diversify social protection** registries beyond the current beneficiary profile, and (iii) **introduce care-sensitive adjustments** such as cash-for-care transfers and pensions for unpaid carers. Investments in childcare, eldercare, and community-based services are essential, alongside the ratification of ILO conventions to protect care workers and the recognition of care as a productive economic sector. Finally, awareness campaigns, paternity leave, and the representation of caregivers in policymaking are needed to drive cultural transformation. Reforming Pakistan's care economy is thus not only a matter of gender equity but a prerequisite for inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development.

List of Abbreviations

BBISP	Benazir Income Support Programme
ILO	International Labour Organization
PPAF	Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund
PBM	Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal
EOBI	Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution
WWF	Workers Welfare Fund
MoPASS	Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Social Security
PSPA	Punjab Social Protection Authority
SSPA	Sindh Social Protection Authority
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NSER	National Socio-Economic Registry
HSPS	Hybrid Social Protection Scheme
PMT	Proxy Means Test
PWD	Persons with Disability
PBS	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics
LFS	Labour Force Survey
NSPS	National Social Protection Strategy
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
GTG	Gender Transformative Governance
ICT	Islamabad Capital Territory
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRB	Gender-Responsive Budgeting
PSDP	Public Sector Development Programme
SECP	Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan
NAVTTTC	National Vocational and Technical Training Commission
TEVTA	Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority

1. Introduction

The realisation of economic and social rights lies at the centre of building an inclusive, just, and equitable society. However, in Pakistan, the advancement of these rights is deeply undermined by structural and institutional barriers that perpetuate systematic and gender injustices. One critical dimension of this injustice is reflected in women's contribution to care, care work, and the care economy.

The prevailing gendered norm in Pakistan positions women as primary caregivers. A report by UN Women (2019) highlights that women in Pakistan spend as much as 11 more hours performing unpaid care and domestic work compared to men. This disproportionate share of unpaid care work is one of the highest in South Asia, rendering women time-poor, and limiting their access to economic opportunities, education, and public life. As of 2024, female labour force participation in Pakistan stands at 24 per cent, one of the lowest rates in the region (World Bank, 2025). This indicates that a significant portion of the population remains outside the labour force due to the burden of unpaid care work, which is further intensified for women from underserved and marginalised areas, where a lack of access to basic utilities and infrastructure—such as clean water, transport, and cooking fuel—adds to their responsibilities.

Similarly, paid care work is largely informal and operates in an unregulated and unprotected manner. Despite the importance of care work in sustaining individuals, societies, and economies, it remains largely invisible and undervalued in national statistics, accounts, development planning, and frameworks. Furthermore, global well-being indexes, like the *Human Development Report*, rank Pakistan in the 'low' human development category, with an HDI value of 0.544 (168th out of 193 countries), while the Global Gender Parity Report ranks Pakistan last in 2025.

Social protection in Pakistan is a key priority within the national development agenda, aimed at reducing poverty and promoting economic inclusion of the poorest and most vulnerable. The country's social protection system encompasses three broad categories: social assistance, social insurance, and labour market programmes. Some of the key social protection programmes include Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), Zakat, Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (PBM), Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution (EOBI), Workers Welfare Fund (WWF), and some microfinance institutions.

Among these initiatives, BISP is the country's flagship social protection programme, registering approximately

Women in Pakistan spend as much as 11 more hours performing unpaid care and domestic work compared to men.

As of 2024, female labour force participation in Pakistan stands at 24 per cent, one of the lowest rates in the region (World Bank, 2025).



10 million beneficiaries across the country and providing cash transfers—both conditional and unconditional—as well as in-kind assistance. Despite this extensive infrastructure and coverage, many informal workers—including domestic workers, home-based workers, and social workers—remain excluded from contributory schemes and formal registries. Furthermore, the existing social protection system lacks care-relevant integrations, such as care services and infrastructure that recognise, reduce, and redistribute the care burden. While the existing architecture of social protection incorporates gender sensitivity as a distinct component, implementation and design largely fall short of embedding gender-responsive or gender-transformative elements that could shift power dynamics and enable women's agency and participation in productive economic activity.

In this context, applying a gender-just governance lens to social protection systems becomes critical for transforming the care economy in Pakistan. Unlike traditional approaches, gender-just governance addresses the systemic injustices and power imbalances, acknowledges that governance is not neutral, and explores how power can be held, shared, and exercised differently (Brody, 2009). It requires social protection to be seen not only as a safety net but also as a tool to shift power, recognise invisible labour, and ensure equitable access to rights and resources. Furthermore, adopting an intersectionality lens illuminates overlapping identities—such as gender, class, and rural-urban divides—that interact to deepen systemic inequalities. Employing these frameworks, the policy paper analyses barriers, identifies entry points, and provides actionable policy recommendations to integrate care into Pakistan's social protection systems.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 explains the methodology used in the paper; Section 3 sets the context and background through a review of the current landscape of social protection and care economy in Pakistan; Section 4 draws on comparative practices and models; Section 5 categorises the key challenges and barriers, including structural, institutional, and political barriers; Section 6 explores gender-just governance and the R framework as the analytical lens; Section 7 identifies entry points and proposes actionable policy recommendations; and Section 8 concludes by summarising the potential of care-inclusive social protection to advance social and economic rights in Pakistan.

2. Methodology

This policy paper adopts an integrated approach that combines participatory, analytical, and comparative methods to examine the landscape, barriers, and entry points for embedding care within Pakistan's social protection framework. Its methodological design draws on insights from a consultative workshop, desk reviews, comparative best practices, and analytical frameworks.

At its core, the paper builds on the outcomes of a two-day consultative workshop organised by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), titled '*Advancing Economic and Social Rights in Pakistan through Care-Inclusive Social Protection*', held on 21-22 August 2025. The workshop provided a multi-stakeholder, cross-sectoral platform to co-create solutions under the broader agenda of gender-transformative governance. It featured context-setting sessions, keynote addresses, group activities, and plenary discussions across thematic areas, including:

- Gender-Just and Transformative Governance;
- Care-Inclusive Social Protection and the 3Rs of Care Work;
- Governance of Social Protection in Pakistan;
- Mapping Structural, Institutional, and Political Barriers; and
- Identifying Policy Levers across legal reforms, data and evidence systems, public investment, education and awareness, gender-responsive budgeting, and regional collaboration.

Participants included representatives from government agencies (Planning Commission, Ministry of Human Rights, National Commission on the Status of Women), academia, civil society, NGOs, labour departments, as well as independent researchers, journalists, and feminist activists, ensuring diverse perspectives and grounded dialogue.

Complementing the workshop findings, the paper undertakes a desk review to analyse Pakistan's legal, policy, and institutional frameworks related to social protection and the care economy. This review covers constitutional mandates, relevant laws, national and provincial initiatives, and institutional mechanisms, drawing on academic literature, government reports, and secondary data. A comparative review of global and regional best practices, particularly from the Asia-Pacific region, further informs lessons and adaptable models for Pakistan's context.

The analysis is guided by two frameworks: the ILO's 5R Framework for Decent Care Work and Gender-Transformative Governance. These frameworks are used to assess existing systems and identify actionable levers for integrating care into social protection.

Together, these approaches ensure that the policy recommendations are evidence-based, contextually grounded, and responsive to stakeholder insights, thereby promoting a feasible and gender-just approach to care-inclusive social protection in Pakistan.



3. Context and Background

3.1 Overview of Pakistan’s Social Protection Landscape

Social protection encompasses a set of policies and programmes aimed at reducing poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion of financially vulnerable women and families, making it a vital component of sustaining lives, especially for at-risk segments of society. In Pakistan, social protection is recognised as a constitutional right for every citizen, without discrimination on any grounds, including caste, creed, race, or gender. As such, the Government of Pakistan is committed to delivering a range of social safety nets through institutions including the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), Zakat, Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (PBM), Employees’ Old-Age Benefits Institution (EOBI), Workers Welfare Fund (WWF), and certain specialised financial institutions (Ministry of Finance, 2025). Following the 18th Amendment, social protection was devolved as a provincial responsibility. However, the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Social Security (MoPASS) oversees policy and programme design at the federal level and coordinates with designated provincial authorities—such as the Punjab Social Protection Authority (PSPA) and Sindh Social Protection Authority (SSPA)—as well as local departments that function as delivery arms. The existing landscape of social protection in Pakistan comprises both contributory and non-contributory initiatives administered at the federal and provincial levels.

Social protection financing relies on budgetary allocation and the support of international development partners to bolster the social protection framework. For FY 2025-26, the government has allocated an unprecedented PKR 734.18¹ billion (4 per cent of the total federal budget outlay) to social protection, marking a 20.16 per cent increase from the previous fiscal year. This reflects the government’s commitment to social protection as a priority area within the national development agenda. Additionally, it is supported by IMF loan conditionalities applied on an annual basis, requiring further expansion of the social protection registry to ensure better targeting and inclusion of vulnerable groups.

At the forefront, Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP)—one of the largest social protection programmes in

Asia—stands as the country’s flagship social safety net, providing financial assistance to millions of low-income households since 2008. Gazdar and Khan (2023), using data from the Household Integrated Economic Survey (HIES) 2018-19, demonstrated the BISP’s effectiveness in identifying the poor and successfully expanding its coverage to one-third of the poorest quintile. As a testament to the government’s commitment to social protection, BISP receives the second-largest allocation in the federal budget.

The social protection framework is further strengthened by the National Socio-Economic Registry (NSER), which serves as a central data repository for targeting eligible beneficiaries of social assistance. Currently, the NSER includes approximately 10 million women beneficiaries across Pakistan. These beneficiaries receive a range of support, including conditional cash transfers (for health, education, and other needs), unconditional cash transfers, and in-kind assistance. Beyond social assistance, social insurance in the form of the EOBI’s contributory pension scheme for formal workers further strengthens Pakistan’s social protection architecture. Furthermore, there are provisions for asset transfer, skill training, microcredit, child labour rehabilitation, contributory saving scheme known as the Hybrid Social Protection Scheme (HSPS), and livelihood and poverty graduation support under the broader umbrella of social protection in Pakistan.

While the social protection framework in Pakistan has expanded and diversified over time, challenges remain—particularly fragmentation among authorities and the exclusion of at-risk groups such as informal care workers. Moreover, social protection is intrinsically linked to the broader pursuit of well-being and human development. Although social protection accounts for a notable share of public spending, Pakistan remains in the ‘low’ human development category, ranking 168th out of 193 countries. A transformative approach requires not only expanding fiscal allocations but also strategically redirecting resources, alongside diversifying beneficiary persona and social protection products to uphold the human development agenda at its core.

¹ Federal Budget FY 2025-26, available at https://www.finance.gov.pk/budget/budget_2025_26/budget_in_brief_10062025.pdf

3.2 Persona of a Typical Social Protection Beneficiary in Pakistan

The typical social protection beneficiary of BISP represents millions of Pakistani women whose lives are shaped by poverty, illiteracy, and the invisibility of care work. Social protection provides them with critical financial relief, but it does not yet fully empower them to break cycles of exclusion. They embody both the vulnerability and the potential of Pakistan's care economy, underscoring why embedding care into governance and social protection is essential for a gender-just future. Current social protection registries, such as BISP, are not diversified in terms of beneficiary 'persona' or 'products'. They primarily target 'ever-married women' below a certain Proxy Means Test (PMT) score, excluding a vast informal workforce, agricultural labourers, and other vulnerable groups. The factors that characterise a typical social protection beneficiary in Pakistan are as follows:

Socioeconomic Profile

- *Education:* Most beneficiaries have little to no formal education. Sixty-seven per cent of women under BISP are illiterate. This makes it difficult for them to understand bank statements, mobile money apps, or formal financial documents.
- *Income and Savings:* Typically, household incomes are irregular. Beneficiaries usually save small amounts, ranging from PKR 500–1000 per month. Prior to Covid-19, this averaged PKR 1000–2000 but has halved since.² Savings are often kept informally at home rather than in banks.
- *Borrowing:* When expenses exceed income, they borrow from relatives or neighbours. Around 35 per cent of women rely on informal loans, with 62 per cent borrowing from family and friends. Formal borrowing from banks or microfinance institutions remains rare.

Daily Life and Care Burden

- A typical day for these women includes care duties, such as household chores, child, and elderly care. Time poverty is severe, with unpaid care work consuming most of their day. Lack of water, sanitation, and transport infrastructure exacerbates their time poverty, leaving little opportunity for formal employment or skill-building.
- This aligns with broader data showing women in Paki-

stan spend nearly ten times more hours than men on unpaid care.

Economic Aspirations

- Almost all beneficiary women (90 per cent) expressed willingness to engage in income-generating activities if provided with adequate training and support to supplement their household income through small-scale enterprises. Their interests lie in microbusinesses and cottage industries, such as embroidery, stitching, or small food ventures, rather than agriculture. However, their entrepreneurial horizon is short-term, as they budget weekly or fortnightly with limited ability to plan beyond immediate needs.

Financial Literacy

- *Mobile Access:* Only 25 per cent of women in this category own a mobile phone. However, 92–96 per cent of households have at least one. Hence, these women can access household phones to receive SMS notifications or calls.
- *Banking:* Only 6.8 per cent of women beneficiaries have physical bank accounts. Instead, most rely on mobile money transfers for BISP payments but often lack a full understanding of digital financial products.
- *Digital Awareness:* About 21 per cent of women are aware of loans, insurance, or microfinance products, but actual uptake remains minimal.

Transformative Change

- *Recognition:* Their unpaid care work sustains their households but is invisible in Pakistan's GDP and social protection policies. Recognising this labour through time use surveys and policy design is the first step to valuing their contributions.
- *Reduction:* Their burdens could be reduced through investments in childcare centres, eldercare facilities, clean water, and energy access—all of which would ease time poverty and improve well-being.
- *Redistribution:* Redistributing care responsibilities within households and communities would enable women to participate more fully in income-generating opportunities. This can be achieved through public services and cultural shifts that encourage men's involvement in care activities.

² These findings build on evidence from our previous research on the saving behaviour of the social protection beneficiaries in Pakistan, such as the world bank study and the impact assessment of Sehat Sahulat Program:

- Adil, F., & Guven, M. (2024). Advancing crisis-resilient social protection through a hybrid social protection scheme in Pakistan: An empirical analysis. World Bank. Available at <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099157308122489191/idu1a787561014813140bf188261da22b9059405>
- Adil, F., & Safdar, R. (n.d.). Research on social health protection and the household economy: Benefits and costs of the Sehat Sahulat Card for poor households in Pakistan. Sustainable Development Policy Institute. Available at https://sdpi.org/research-on-social-health-protection-and-the-household-economy-benefits-and-costs-of-the-sehat-sahulat-card-for-poor-households-in-pakistan-/publication_detail

3.3 Care Economy in Pakistan

The care economy refers to a broad set of activities—both paid and unpaid—centred on the provision of care. It encompasses caregiving, social reproduction, and support services essential for maintaining and sustaining societal well-being. Hence, care work and care economy lie at the core of inclusive and equitable growth and development. However, a significant share of this care work remains unpaid, with women shouldering a disproportionate burden of these responsibilities.

These caregiving responsibilities encompass a range of direct and indirect activities such as childcare, elderly care, care for persons with disabilities (PWD), cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks. In rural and underserved areas, women bear an even larger burden due to inadequate access to basic utilities and infrastructure, including fetching water, collecting fuel for cooking, working in fields, and rearing livestock. UN Women (2018) reports that women in rural areas of Pakistan actively participate in agriculture alongside care work, with 60 per cent working unpaid in family farms and enterprises. This disproportionate burden limits women's participation in education, skill development, employment, and other public activities. The analysis of the nationally representative Labour Force Survey conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2022) found that a majority³ of women outside the labour force (over 50 per cent) are unwilling to participate in the labour market in the near future due to housekeeping and care responsibilities.

Alongside the unpaid care work, paid care work constitutes a significant component of the care economy, providing direct and indirect care services as domestic workers, social workers, healthcare workers, disability carers, and others. These workers are largely employed in informal settings and operate outside the ambit of social protection and legal regulations, making them vulnerable to exploitation, wage theft, and workplace harassment. Despite the centrality of care work in sustaining individuals, societies, and communities, it remains invisible and undervalued in national statistics, development planning, and policy frameworks.

Another critical dimension is the gendered nature of the care economy, reflecting deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that regard women as solely responsible for caregiving. Even women participating in the labour market often face a 'double burden', managing both household and professional responsibilities. The burden is amplified by the absence of publicly funded childcare and eldercare facilities as well as the lack of family-friendly policies.

Currently, Pakistan's approach to the care economy is largely restricted to policy formulation, with a significant

gap between policy and implementation (Khalid, Othman, and Zakaria 2023). Moreover, there remains a significant gap in the explicit integration of care-relevant infrastructure and services within existing plans, frameworks, and programmes.

3.4 Policy and Legal Frameworks in Pakistan

An overview of the existing legal and policy frameworks in Pakistan reveals a mix of constitutional mandates, federal and provincial laws, and policies that reflect formal attempts to mainstream gender at the legal and policy levels. This section briefly highlights the existing frameworks in Pakistan that contain provisions for social protection, care economy, domestic and informal workers, and gender-just governance.

Starting from the constitutional mandates, the Constitution guarantees the fundamental rights of equality, social justice, and the well-being of all citizens under various articles. For example, Article 25 ensures the equality of all citizens before the law without any discrimination on the basis of sex. It also reaffirms the special provisions for the protection of women and children. Article 37 advocates for the promotion of social justice and the eradication of social evils, and includes explicit provisions for just and humane working conditions. It ensures that women and children are not employed in hazardous and inappropriate work environments while assuring employment-related benefits for women. Similarly, Article 38 mandates the promotion of social and economic well-being of all citizens and provides for social protection without discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, gender, or race. Article 7 prohibits slavery and forced labour; Article 6 deters discrimination in respect of access to public spaces; Article 27 safeguards against discrimination in services; Article 34 advocates for full participation of women in all spheres of national life; Article 35 provides for the protection of the family; and Article 36 ensures the protection of minorities.

In the pursuit of social protection, there is the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) 2007 and the BISP Act 2010 that mandate the delivery of targeted social protection to the vulnerable and underprivileged segments of society. Building upon this, the Ehsaas Strategy was launched in 2019 as the multidimensional framework that extends the social safety nets to homeless and most marginalised, including orphans, street children, migrants, transgenders, victims of child and bonded labour, daily wage workers, and substance abusers. Further, it also lays out the commitment to include informal workers in the social safety net and contains provisions for recognition and protection of domestic workers as well.

³ The statistics are derived from microdata analysis of the publicly available Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2020-21.

Some notable developments that indicate provincial-level commitments towards the recognition of domestic workers include the Punjab Domestic Workers Act 2019 and the Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Act 2022, which provide the basis for safeguarding the dignity of domestic workers by ensuring a standard work environment. Similarly, for home-based workers, there is the Sindh Home-Based Workers Act 2018, the KP Home-Based Workers Act 2021, the Balochistan Home-Based Workers Act 2022, and the Punjab Home-Based Workers Act 2023. These legislative frameworks provide the statutory basis for access to social security and protection of those engaged in providing home-based goods and services. Overall, these frameworks explicitly address the caregiving and domestic work, which remain in the underrecognised and undervalued care economy, largely dominated by women.

Legislation that aims to mainstream gender at the federal and provincial levels include the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2021, the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act 2016, the Sindh Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2013, the KPK Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2021, the Balochistan Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2014, the Maternity and Paternity Leave Act 2023, and the Day Care Centres Act 2023. Other key frameworks include the Factories Act, the National and Provincial ECCE Standards, the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2020, the Muslim Family Laws (Amendment) Act 2021, the Sindh Women Agricultural Workers' Act 2019, the Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act 2020, the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018, the Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Act 2017, the National Commissions on the Status of Women Act 2012, the Gender Budgeting Strategy 2023, and the National Gender Policy Framework 2022.

Compliance with these legal and policy frameworks promotes the social, economic, and political participation of women by protecting their rights and ending all forms of discrimination and gender-based violence. It also aims

at mainstreaming gender and gender equality practices in policies, programmes, action plans, and priorities of the government, whilst setting a stepping stone for gender-transformative governance that advances women's empowerment.

In this regard, Pakistan is also committed to certain international obligations and standards, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, and certain ILO conventions, such as the Equal Remuneration Convention, the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, the Forced Labour Convention, the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, the Maritime Labour Convention, and the Labour Statistics Convention. Moreover, Pakistan is a signatory to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2030), which support the deliberative themes of interest under its multiple goals. For example, Goal 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all men and women, and Goal 8 aims to promote sustainable economic growth by providing productive employment and decent work for all. Under these SDGs, target 5.4 of Goal 5 explicitly calls for recognising and valuing unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within households and families, as nationally appropriate.

Taken together, these frameworks reflect Pakistan's evolving commitment to gender justice, social protection, and recognition of informal and care work. However, a persistent gap between policy intent and implementation remains. Weak institutionalisation, limited fiscal prioritisation, and inadequate service provision continue to undermine progress. Bridging this gap requires stronger political will, robust monitoring, and institutional frameworks capable of transforming policy commitments into lived equity for women and caregivers.

4. Comparative Global Practices and Models

This section provides a snapshot of comparative practices and interventions adopted across the globe and the Asia-Pacific region, aimed at institutionalising and strengthening the care economy. These experiences offer valuable insights for Pakistan to recognise and formalise the care economy by integrating it into legal frameworks and regulations, such as social protection. These comparative practices are categorised under the following eight themes:

Country	Program/Intervention	5R Relevance
Institutional and Policy Frameworks		
Indonesia	Roadmap on Care Economy⁴ <i>Integrates childcare, eldercare, parental leave, and decent work for care workers into national development planning. Formalises the care sector, boosts women’s labour force participation, and establishes a Care Working Group for implementation.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, Represent</i>
Nepal	National Care Working Group (CWG)⁵ <i>A multi-stakeholder group under the National Planning Commission that integrates care into development planning. Promotes recognition of care, ensures social protection for caregivers, and aligns policies with national development goals.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, Represent</i>
Fiji	National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023–2028⁶ <i>Links GBV prevention with women’s and families’ care responsibilities. Integrates the 5Rs of care to ensure recognition, reduction, redistribution, reward, and representation.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, Represent</i>
Philippines	WEE Care Ordinance⁷ <i>Mandates local governments to invest in data, care services, labour-saving equipment, and budget allocations for care. Redirects Gender and Development (GAD) funds towards care priorities.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Represent</i>
Uruguay	National Integrated Care System⁸ <i>Recognises care as a legal right and mandates the state to provide quality care. Includes legal frameworks, workforce training, services, and monitoring.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, Represent</i>

⁴ See Indonesia launches its Road Map for Care Economy for a more Gender Equal World of Work, available at <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/indonesia-launches-its-road-map-care-economy-more-gender-equal-world-work>

⁵ See Nepal establishes a “Care Working Group” to advance women’s economic empowerment, available at <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2024/02/nepal-establishes-a-care-working-group>

⁶ See Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023-2028, available at <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/09/fiji-national-action-plan-to-prevent-violence-against-all-women-and-girls-2023-2028>

⁷ See Addressing unpaid care to close the gender gap in the Philippines and Zimbabwe: The Women’s Economic Empowerment and Care Project Report 2016-2019, available at <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620933/er-we-care-philippines-zimbabwe-project-report-170120-en.pdf;jsessionid=78255A396D8799847308493D644368E2?sequence=1>

⁸ See The National Integrated Care System in Uruguay: An Opportunity for the Economic Empowerment of Women, available at <https://lac.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Americas/Documents/Publicaciones/2019/10/SNIC%20web%20INGLES.pdf>

Cambodia	Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (PPWSA)⁹ <i>Provides affordable and accessible water to low-income and peri-urban households. Reduces women's unpaid care burden while improving health and well-being.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute</i>
Colombia	Bogota Care Blocks¹⁰ <i>Centralised neighbourhood hubs offer free care for children, elderly, and persons with disabilities, as well as training and wellness for caregivers. Repurposes public infrastructure to reduce mobility constraints and redistribute care responsibilities.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute</i>
Labour Saving Infrastructure and Technologies		
Indonesia & Kenya	Navaza water filters¹¹ <i>Provides affordable ceramic water filters to reduce women's time spent collecting and purifying water. Improves access to clean water for low-income households and reduces unpaid care burdens.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce</i>
Rwanda	UN Women 3R programme¹² <i>Distributes labour-saving technologies like efficient stoves, water tanks, and transport equipment. Reduces time poverty and health risks from traditional cooking and heavy domestic work.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce</i>
Bangladesh and Cambodia	ATEC Clean Cooking Solutions¹³ <i>Provides biodigesters and electric stoves to low-income families to replace harmful fuels. Saves time, improves health, and reduces emissions from household cooking.</i>	
Advocacy, Movement Building and Narrative Change		
Philippines	LABA YU Campaign¹⁴ <i>Online advocacy campaign reframed laundry as an act of love, encouraging men to share household work. Sparked public conversations challenging gendered care norms.</i>	<i>Recognise, Redistribute</i>
Arab States	Dare to Care Campaign¹⁵ <i>UN Women initiative engaged men, youth, faith actors, and institutions to redefine masculinities. Promoted shared caregiving while pushing for legal and policy reforms.</i>	<i>Recognise, Redistribute</i>

⁹ See Cambodia: Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority: An Exemplary Water Utility in Asia, available at https://ppp.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/PhnomPenh_ExemplaryWaterUtilityinAsia_EN.pdf

¹⁰ See Bogota Care Blocks, available at <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/bogota-care-blocks/>

¹¹ See Transforming the care economy through impact investing case study: Nazava, available at <https://www.the-care-economy-knowledge-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Nazava-Water-Filters-Case-Study-PDF.pdf>

¹² See UN Women provides time-saving energy efficient kits to reduce domestic care work for rural women in four districts of Rwanda, available at <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2022/09/un-women-provides-time-saving-energy-efficient-kits-to-reduce-domestic-care-work-for-rural-women-in-four-districts-of-rwanda#:~:text=To%20reduce%20the%20care%20demands,and%2047%20households%20in%20Rubavu.>

¹³ See Transforming the core economy through impact investing case study: ATEC, available at <https://www.the-care-economy-knowledge-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ATEC-Case-Study-PDF.pdf>

¹⁴ See 'I Laba Yu': Campaign for housework equality in Tacloban, available at <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1063430>

¹⁵ See 'Dare to Care': Transforming Patriarchal Masculinities and Social Norms, available at <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/masculinities-social-norms-and-youth/dare-to-care>

Digital platform for Formalising Care Work		
Bangladesh	HelloTask¹⁶ <i>Mobile app connects households with verified domestic workers, accessible even on basic phones. Improves fair hiring for employers while offering decent work for care workers.</i>	Recognise, Reward
Vietnam	JupViec¹⁷ <i>Digital platform connects trained domestic workers with households for cleaning services under clear contracts. Provides upskilling for workers and formalises care as a service sector.</i>	Recognise, Reward
Childcare Models		
Bangladesh	Phulki Community Creches¹⁸ <i>Runs affordable childcare centres in communities and factories, and provides training for women and workers. Reduces women's care burden while formalising care work.</i>	Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute
Bangladesh	BRAC Home-Based Childcare Model¹⁹ <i>Supports home-based childcare in urban slums, enabling women to work or earn income at home. Also runs specialised daycare centres²⁰ for children with disabilities from poor families.</i>	Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute
India	National Creches Scheme /Palna Scheme²¹ <i>Provides childcare for children of working mothers through partnerships with NGOs and women's groups. Ensures equitable access via income-based fees and supports women's workforce participation.</i>	Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute
Ethiopia	Future Hope of Addis Ababa Early Childhood Development Programme²² <i>Expands preschools, play spaces, daycare, and parenting support for vulnerable communities. Reduces unpaid care and improves child learning outcomes.</i>	Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute
Care Allowance		
Turkey	Home Care Allowance²³ <i>Offers cash stipends to family members caring for elderly or disabled dependents. Formally recognises unpaid care work while ensuring quality through oversight.</i>	Recognise, Reward

¹⁶ See Transforming the care economy through impact investing case study: HelloTask, available at <https://www.the-care-economy-knowledge-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/HelloTask-Case-Study-PDF.pdf>

¹⁷ See Transforming the care economy through impact investing case study: JupViec.vn, available at <https://www.the-care-economy-knowledge-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/JupViec-Case-Study-PDF.pdf>

¹⁸ See Transforming the care economy through impact investing case study: Phulki, available at <https://www.the-care-economy-knowledge-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Phulki-Case-Study-PDF.pdf>

¹⁹ See How home-based childcare facilities support women's workforce engagement in low-income areas of Dhaka city, available at <https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/how-home-based-childcare-facilities-support-womens-workforce-engagement-in-low-income-areas-of-dhaka-city/>

²⁰ See New children's day care centres in Bangladesh, available at <https://www.apaseninternational.org.uk/new-childrens-day-care-centres-in-bangladesh/>

²¹ See National Creches Scheme, available at <https://www.indiafilings.com/learn/national-creche-scheme/>

²² See Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa Early Childhood Development (ECD) Program, available at <https://nurturing-care.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FHA.pdf>

²³ See Regulation on Home Care Allowance was Published in the Official Gazette, available at <https://www.aile.gov.tr/eyhgm-en/haberler/regulation-on-home-care-allowance-was-published-in-the-official-gazette/>

Community based Care Services		
India	UN Women ‘Better Skills Better Care’²⁴ <i>Links vocational training for women with community-based childcare services. Empowers women economically while improving childcare outcomes.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward</i>
India	Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)²⁵ <i>Union for informal women workers providing childcare, healthcare, training, and social protection. Reduces unpaid care and secures livelihoods while amplifying women’s collective voice.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward</i>
Social Protection		
Brazil	Bolsa Família <i>Conditional cash transfer programme provides income to poor families tied to health and education compliance. Targets women as recipients, strengthening their caregiving role.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute</i>
India	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) <i>Guarantees rural households wage employment with women’s quotas and on-site childcare provisions. Provides livelihoods while addressing women’s mobility and care burdens.</i>	<i>Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward</i>

4.1 Transferable Takeaways for Pakistan

These comparative practices and models offer valuable and actionable lessons for Pakistan to advance more gender-just governance systems by institutionalising care and integrating it into social protection. The primary takeaway is to develop a national-level framework or policy document around care as demonstrated by Indonesia, Nepal, and Fiji. This will allow care to become a national and provincial priority, providing a scaffolding for coordinated action, constituency, legitimacy, resource alignment, and inclusive service delivery. In developing countries like Pakistan, basic household chores and needs are extremely labour-intensive and time-consuming due to the lack of access to basic infrastructure. To address these challenges, the labour- and time-saving solutions from Indonesia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Bangladesh offer transferable insights to reduce women’s unpaid care burden.

Care and care work are largely seen as extension of women’s biological reproductive role, making it solely the women’s responsibility. Further, the socio-cultural practices and norms reinforce the gendered division of roles and responsibilities. In this context, the social programming activities, such as advocacy campaigns like LABA YU and Dare to Care, could be replicated in localised contexts aimed at narrative change. Moreover, digital interventions such as HelloTask and JupViec demonstrate the

importance of leveraging digital technology to formalise care work and protect informal care workers. Pakistan can also draw upon these interventions by developing accessible platforms and registries for care workers that not only formalise care work but also extend labour rights, social benefits, and protection from exploitation.

Moving ahead, the childcare models adopted by Bangladesh and India have the dual benefit of enhancing female labour force participation (by freeing up time spent on childcare) and improving child well-being through accessible, affordable, and quality early childhood education and care services. Similarly, cash allowances introduced in Turkey provide a crucial mechanism for recognising and incentivising the unpaid care burden. Furthermore, as depicted in Lady Health Worker Programme, community-based organisations and services are the most viable option for localised delivery and context-sensitive implementation. Lastly, global experiences provide strong examples of integrating care into social protection to address the vulnerabilities of the segment of society that bears the largest unpaid care burden. These are illustrations, and all key takeaways have been comprehensively incorporated in the policy recommendations section.

²⁴ See Better Skills Better Care, available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Better-Skills-Better-Care_Final.pdf

²⁵ See Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), available at <https://www.sewa.org/>

5. Key Challenges and Barriers

Despite the progress made through large-scale programmes such as the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Pakistan’s social protection system continues to fall short in addressing the deeply gendered dynamics of care. The care economy—encompassing both paid and unpaid labour—remains undervalued, invisible in official statistics, and weakly integrated into policy design. This section analyses the structural, political, institutional, and economic barriers to care-inclusive social protection in Pakistan, highlighting how the absence of measures for recognition, reduction, and redistribution perpetuates gender inequality.

5.1 Structural Barriers: Patriarchy and the Invisibility of Care

At the structural level, entrenched patriarchal norms position care work as a private, familial duty rather than a public responsibility. Women in Pakistan spend nearly ten times more hours on unpaid care work than men, yet this contribution remains absent from the country’s national accounts. Without due recognition, women’s labour is excluded from economic policymaking and continues to be framed as a natural extension of their gender roles.

These structural dynamics produce what feminist scholars describe as ‘time poverty’—the overburdening of women with unpaid care tasks that restricts their ability to engage in education, paid employment, political participation, or leisure. The structural framing of women as caregivers also reinforces occupational segregation, where women are clustered in low-paying, insecure, and often informal care-related jobs. The cultural expectation that women ‘naturally’ provide care perpetuates intergenerational cycles of gender inequality and systematically excludes men from participating in caregiving roles.

5.2 Political Barriers: Policy Capture, Elite Interests, and the Political Economy of Social Protection

Pakistan’s social protection system is embedded within a broader political economy characterised by elite capture,

centralised decision-making, and constrained fiscal sovereignty. While flagship programmes such as the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) have expanded coverage and improved targeting, their design, budget allocations, and reform priorities are often shaped by dominant political networks and elite control over state resources, thereby limiting their potential to drive structural gender transformation.

- *Dominant elite interests:* Decision-making power is concentrated among political and bureaucratic elites. Policy formulation and programme governance remain dominated by senior bureaucrats, elected representatives, and donor institutions. This keeps policy spaces insulated from feminist movements, labour unions, and grassroots caregiving constituencies who could push for deeper accountability and redistribution. This asymmetry constrains social protection to serve only as a tool of political visibility and legitimacy, rather than a transformative mechanism of power and resource redistribution.
- *Fiscal dependency and donor influence:* Pakistan’s social protection financing remains vulnerable to IMF conditionalities and austerity-driven fiscal reforms, which prioritise short-term macroeconomic stability over redistributive investment in the care economy. For instance, IMF-mandated social protection ‘expansion’ often focuses narrowly on beneficiary identification and cash transfer efficiency rather than care infrastructure, labour protections, or long-term equity goals. Such donor-driven parameters constrain the policy space for embedding gender-transformative reforms, narrowing the agenda to technocratic fixes that overlook the political economy of care.
- *Restrictive governance structures:* Women’s representation in decision-making positions—both political and bureaucratic—remains marginal, limiting the visibility of care as a policy concern. Despite Pakistan’s formal commitments to gender equality and international frameworks such as CEDAW and the SDGs, care continues to be treated as a private household issue rather than a collective public responsibility. Political elites often invoke ‘women’s empowerment’ rhetorically while preserving policy control within male-dominated institutions, reinforcing patriarchal norms that sustain gendered divisions of labour.

5.3 Institutional Barriers: Weak Laws, Limited Data, and Enforcement Gaps

Pakistan has introduced some progressive measures, such as the Punjab Domestic Workers Act 2019 and the Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Act 2022. However, these laws remain under-enforced, poorly resourced, and largely unknown to workers themselves. Informal care workers—who represent the majority of paid care providers—are left without effective labour protections, social security, or avenues for redress.

Compounding this is the lack of reliable gender-disaggregated and care-related data. Pakistan does not conduct regular time use surveys, meaning that the scale of unpaid care work remains statistically invisible. Without data, policymakers cannot design evidence-based interventions to recognise and reduce women's time poverty. Moreover, national budgetary processes are rarely gender-responsive, and care-related expenditures are not systematically tracked, making it difficult to assess or advocate for adequate resource allocation.

Institutional inertia is also evident in the limited capacity of implementing agencies, many of which lack training in gender analysis. This results in a cycle where policies nominally include women but fail to transform the structures that constrain them.

5.4 Economic Barriers: Informal and Undervalued

Economically, care work—whether paid or unpaid—is systematically undervalued in Pakistan. Unpaid care work, which constitutes a significant share of Pakistan's economic activity, is not counted in GDP or labour force participation statistics. This absence of valuation perpetuates the myth that care is not 'real work', thereby justifying its exclusion from economic planning. From the perspective of the 3R framework, this represents a failure to recognise care as productive labour.

At the same time, women's time poverty constrains their participation in the formal labour market, limiting their economic mobility and reinforcing cycles of poverty. Without policies to reduce the care burden and redistribute responsibilities, women remain trapped in a double bind: economically dependent on male earners while simultaneously shouldering the invisible labour that sustains households and communities.

5.5 Intersectional Dimensions of Exclusion

In Pakistan, the burdens of care are not experienced equally. Women's experiences of care work are mediated by class, caste, ethnicity, geography, and social status, which together shape distinct and often compounding forms of exclusion. These dynamics manifest in different ways across social and geographic contexts:

- Women from low-income, rural, and marginalised communities face disproportionate care responsibilities. Rural women, for instance, spend long hours collecting water, fuel, and fodder—labour that sustains households yet remains unrecognised and uncompensated, thereby deepening their time poverty.
- In urban informal settlements, the absence of affordable childcare and eldercare services often compels older daughters to withdraw from school to assist in caregiving, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of gendered inequality.
- Similarly, minority and lower-caste women employed as domestic workers endure layered vulnerabilities linked to class-based exploitation, social stigma, and lack of labour protections.

These intersectional realities illustrate that care is not merely a gendered concern; it is structured by socioeconomic hierarchies, geographic inequalities, and historical systems of exclusion rooted in Pakistan's colonial past.

During the colonial period in South Asia, British administrative and legal systems introduced a governance model that formally separated the public economic sphere from the private domestic sphere. Economic and political life—including production, trade, governance, and law—were categorised as public and masculine domains, while the household was relegated to the private and feminine realm. This division was institutionalised through colonial civil codes, labour laws, and property regimes that recognised men as economic actors and rights-holders, while women's reproductive and care labour was rendered socially necessary but legally invisible.

By embedding these distinctions within bureaucratic and legal frameworks, colonial governance entrenched the invisibility and devaluation of care work, reinforcing patriarchal norms that positioned women's labour as an extension of familial duty rather than a contributor to the economy. These inherited institutional logics persist in the postcolonial state, where economic and social policies often prioritise productivity, formal employment, and market efficiency, thereby further marginalising unpaid and informal care work that sustains households and communities.

Adopting a decolonial lens allows for a deeper understanding of how these historical hierarchies continue to shape contemporary gendered divisions of labour in Pakistan. The enduring separation between public and private spheres—embedded in administrative, legal, and cultural systems—continues to obscure the centrality of care work in social and economic life. Recognising and addressing these colonial continuities is thus critical to designing care-inclusive and equitable social protection policies that challenge structural inequalities rather than reproduce them.

5.6 Cultural Barriers

Finally, deep-rooted cultural resistance remains a significant barrier to redistributing care roles within households and society. Social norms that equate masculinity with breadwinning and femininity with caregiving discourage men from taking on care responsibilities. Workplace policies rarely incentivise men's

caregiving, for instance, through provisions such as paternity leave or flexible work arrangements. Awareness campaigns that challenge gender stereotypes are rare, and when they exist, often fail to shift entrenched attitudes.

This cultural resistance reinforces the cycle of non-recognition (where care is seen as natural rather than work), limited reduction (due to over-reliance on women's unpaid labour), and stalled redistribution (with care remaining concentrated within women's unpaid sphere).

Together, these barriers reveal why Pakistan's social protection system continues to reinforce rather than transform gender inequalities. The failure to recognise care work erases women's contributions from economic and policy agendas. The lack of investment in reducing women's time poverty sustains barriers to education, employment, and political participation. Meanwhile, the absence of mechanisms to redistribute care responsibilities across households, the state, and the market ensures that women remain structurally disadvantaged.



6. Analytical Frameworks

6.1 Conceptualisation of Analytical Framework

Based on the contextual relevance of integrating social protection within Pakistan's care economy, this paper grounds policy recommendations in the following analytical frameworks.

6.1.1 Gender-Transformative Governance

Governance is the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's social and economic resources for development (Asian Development Bank, 2022). It refers to how individuals or institutions with authority use that power. Gender-just governance is a transformative approach that ensures governance systems are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs and rights of all genders, especially women and marginalised groups. This transformation goes beyond achieving numerical parity between men and women; it requires organising public institutions, laws, policies, and budgets to actively dismantle deeply entrenched, historical, and ongoing gendered injustices, to reshape who holds power, how it is exercised, and whose needs and knowledge count in decision-making (Brody, 2009).

Incorporating a gender justice lens into governance requires ensuring that governance is not gender-neutral; that it recognises intersectionality as imperative; that representation alone is insufficient (moving beyond tokenism); that resources are equitably distributed; and that harmful gender stereotypes in governance structures are dismantled. The ultimate stage on the gender integration continuum is the Gender-Transformative Governance (GTG) that challenges underlying norms, restructures power dynamics and institutions, mainstreams intersectional gender analysis, and centres the agency and knowledge of the local.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) developed a Gender Transformative Communication Toolkit that provides comprehensive guidance on what constitutes gender-transformative communication, its key principles and focus areas, and how to employ it to assess the gender responsiveness of policies and programmes (Affiat, Vaz and Rahmadhani, 2022). Furthermore, UNICEF's Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection (GRASSP)

project employs a gender integration continuum in social policy design and implies that transformative social protection systems are those that redistribute power relations while addressing the structural barriers that perpetuate gender inequalities (UNICEF, 2024).

6.1.2 The 'R' Framework

The analytical framework of the 3R (Recognise, Reduce, and Redistribute) has widely been deliberated and positioned as central to the policy discourse on care work by feminist scholars (Elson, 2017; Fraser, 2007; Fraser & Honneth, 2003) and international development institutions, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), UN Women, and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). This framework emerged as a response to the systemic invisibility of unpaid care work in economic planning and aims at providing a practical lens to inform and develop care policy. The framework was later expanded to the 5R model with the addition of Reward and Represent, which call for a transformative approach aimed at the formalisation of care work and the broader care economy. Both the 3R and 5R frameworks have been promoted as approaches to address the gendered dynamics, intersectionality, and other structures shaping the care economy.

Ferrant, Pesando, and Nowacka (2014) employed 3R to relate unpaid care work as the 'missing link' in understanding gender gaps in labour market outcomes and initiated the subsequent policy debates on measuring and reducing time poverty. The ILO (2018) employed the 5R framework in its report Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work to examine the intersectionality of paid and unpaid care work, while emphasising the need to promote decent work for all in the labour market. Building on this, UN Women (2022) developed a comprehensive toolkit centred on the 5R framework to advance work on the care economy as a tool to achieve gender equality, whilst promoting the well-being of both care workers and care recipients. Therefore, employing this conceptual lens allows for analysing the systemic integration of care into social protection as a driver of gender-just governance and women's economic empowerment in Pakistan.

6.2 Gender-Transformative Governance

A Gender-Transformative Governance (GTG) lens provides the analytical foundation for this policy paper. GTG goes beyond simply acknowledging gender inequalities. It actively seeks to reshape power relations, norms, and structures that perpetuate gendered disparities. Unlike gender-just or gender-sensitive frameworks, which primarily aim to include women or address inequities within existing systems, GTG interrogates the root causes of inequality and reimagines governance mechanisms to produce more equitable outcomes. Key principles include:

- *Power redistribution*: Challenging hierarchical and patriarchal power structures within institutions, policymaking, and resource allocation.
- *Norm and cultural shift*: Addressing social and cultural norms that assign caregiving and unpaid work disproportionately to women, while promoting shared responsibilities across genders.
- *Intersectional accountability*: Recognising how overlapping forms of oppression (e.g., class, race, age, disability, migration status) interact with gender in shaping access to social protection and care resources.
- *Participatory decision-making*: Embedding mechanisms for the meaningful participation of marginalised groups, especially care workers, in designing and monitoring policies.

6.2.1 Relevance to the Care Economy

The care economy—encompassing paid and unpaid care work in households, communities, and formal sectors—is structurally undervalued, disproportionately performed by women, and often invisible in economic policy. Applying a Gender-Transformative Governance (GTG) lens allows policymakers to:

- *Recognise care work as central economic labour* by integrating it into national accounts, labour policies, and social protection frameworks.
- *Redistribute responsibilities* between genders and across public, private, and community spheres through policies like subsidised childcare, parental leave reforms, and flexible work arrangements.
- *Strengthen labour protections* for both formal and informal care workers, including domestic and migrant workers, to ensure fair wages, social security, and legal recognition.
- *Target systemic inequalities rather than surface-level inclusion* so that GTG fosters structural reforms that enhance the visibility, value, and rights of care work within society.

6.2.2 Relevance to Social Protection Contexts

Social protection systems often fail to account for the realities of care work and the gendered dynamics of vulnerability. Using GTG as an analytical lens:

- *Encourages the design of benefits and services* (e.g., pensions, health insurance, paid family leave) that reflect caregiving responsibilities.
- *Highlights the need for inclusive policy targeting*, ensuring marginalised groups, especially informal women workers, receive adequate support.
- *Supports transformative financing models* that invest in care infrastructure and social protection, challenging the notion that care work is private or non-economic.
- *Promotes monitoring and evaluation frameworks* that track not only participation but also the redistribution of care responsibilities and shifts in gender norms.

6.2.3 Implications for Policy Design

Applying a GTG lens in this context allows recommendations to move beyond ‘gender-blind’ or ‘gender-inclusive’ interventions. Instead, it enables systemic policy change across both care and social protection domains, ensuring:

- Women’s unpaid and paid labour is adequately recognised and remunerated.
- Policy interventions redistribute care responsibilities and challenge patriarchal norms.
- Social protection systems are responsive, inclusive, and equitable, addressing intersecting vulnerabilities.

In sum, GTG provides a framework for reshaping policy architecture to achieve lasting gender equality in the care economy and social protection landscapes.

6.3 Operationalising the 5R Framework for Care-Inclusive Social Protection in Pakistan

By adopting the 5R framework in social protection reforms, Pakistan can shift from welfare-oriented, consumption-smoothing programmes towards a structurally transformative approach that values care as both an economic sector and a public good. This approach aligns with global standards on decent care work while responding to Pakistan’s specific institutional, fiscal, and cultural realities. Embedding care into BISP registries, budgeting processes, infrastructure investments, and labour protections will not only advance gender-

transformative governance but also strengthen the foundations of inclusive and sustainable development.

6.3.1 Recognise

Recognising care work is fundamental to transforming Pakistan's social protection system. This requires incorporating unpaid care into national accounts and institutionalising regular time use surveys to capture its scale and value. Recognition should also extend to formal legal and policy validation of care workers, especially those in the informal sector, such as domestic, home-based, and agricultural workers, who remain excluded from protections. Social protection registries, such as the NSER/BISP database, must diversify their targeting beyond 'ever-married women' to reflect the realities of informal workers, caregivers of persons with disabilities, and elderly care providers. By embedding recognition into data systems and legal frameworks, the state can make care visible as an economic and social priority.

6.3.2 Reduce

Reducing women's time poverty requires strategic investments in social and physical infrastructure. Pakistan must prioritise affordable childcare and eldercare facilities, safe and reliable public transportation, and access to clean water, sanitation, and energy. These investments directly reduce women's unpaid care burden and allow time for education, paid employment, and civic participation. Financing should leverage gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) within federal and provincial Public Sector Development Programmes (PSDPs) to reallocate resources towards care infrastructure, rather than limiting funds to large-scale physical projects that offer political visibility but little social transformation.

6.3.3 Redistribute

Redistribution demands a restructuring of care responsibilities across the state, market, households, and communities. In Pakistan, this means expanding BISP and related programmes to include 'cash for care' top-ups, child allowances, and pensions for unpaid carers, ensuring that caregiving is not borne by women alone. Employers and the private sector should be incentivised by regulators such

as Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP) to adopt family-friendly workplace policies, including paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and on-site childcare. Redistribution also requires cultural transformation, awareness campaigns, and the introduction of paternity leave provisions that normalise caregiving as a shared responsibility between men and women.

6.3.4 Reward

Rewarding care involves ensuring decent work, fair wages, and social protection for paid care workers. Pakistan should ratify and implement ILO conventions such as C189 (Domestic Workers), C183 (Maternity Protection), and C156 (Workers with Family Responsibilities), and embed them into national and provincial laws. Paid care workers—such as domestic workers, nurses, and early childhood educators—should be guaranteed minimum wage protections, social security coverage, and access to skill development opportunities through institutions such as National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC) and Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA). Rewarding care also involves recognising it as a productive sector within GDP, capable of generating employment and contributing to national output.

6.3.5 Represent

Representation ensures that care workers and caregivers have a voice in shaping policies that affect them. Pakistan should strengthen collective platforms such as domestic workers' unions, women-led cooperatives, and grassroots community care organisations. Representation also requires embedding care perspectives into policymaking forums, parliamentary committees, and local government structures, ensuring that women are not only beneficiaries but active decision-makers. The BISP's registry, which covers over 10 million households, can be leveraged to build pathways for women's political and social mobilisation around care. Such representation ensures that reforms are accountable, sustainable, and aligned with the lived realities of those at the centre of the care economy.

7. Policy Recommendations: A Phased Roadmap for Embedding Care in Social Protection Systems

This section builds on the broad thematic policy areas discussed in the previous section, and translates them into actionable policy recommendations. The key takeaway from dialogues on the care economy in Pakistan is the need to embed care within existing social protection frameworks. Doing so is essential for advancing both economic and social rights and moving towards a care-inclusive model of governance. This approach not only reduces the disproportionate burden of unpaid care on women but also strengthens social cohesion, generates employment, and contributes to sustainable and inclusive economic growth—all while leveraging the existing institutional architecture of social protection.

Embedding care within Pakistan’s social protection framework requires a phased approach that balances

immediate action with long-term structural transformation. This ensures that decision-makers avoid reliance on ‘magic recipe’ quick fix approaches, and instead pursue context-specific, incremental reforms informed by best practices rather than top-down blueprints. In the short term, interventions should prioritise visible and achievable reforms that strengthen existing systems. Over the medium and long term, efforts should aim to institutionalise care as a central pillar of social protection, governance, and economic policy.

The roadmap that follows outlines short-, medium-, and long-term priorities across nine interrelated policy areas, drawing upon global lessons and the insights generated through the FES consultative workshop.

7.1 Institutionalising Care in Social Protection Policy		
Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Form an Inter-Ministerial Working Group on Care Economy under the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety (MoPASS) to coordinate efforts across government agencies, civil society, and private actors. → Conduct a situational analysis and stakeholder mapping to identify existing care-related initiatives and policy gaps. → Integrate care-sensitive objectives within ongoing social protection reforms, including BISP and Ehsaas initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Develop a National Care Policy and Roadmap, modelled on Indonesia’s Care Economy Roadmap 2025–2045 and Nepal’s National Care Working Group. → Pilot provincial care strategies tailored to local realities, including rural and low-income communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Establish a National Care Commission to institutionalise inter-sectoral coordination, budget oversight, and accountability mechanisms for integrating care into national and provincial systems. → Embed care economy goals within Pakistan’s long-term development vision (commonly referred to as ‘Vision 2047’) and its sustainable development planning frameworks.

7.2 Integrating Care into Existing Social Protection Programmes

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Introduce ‘Care Top-Up’ cash transfers within BISP for caregivers of the elderly, persons with disabilities, and chronically ill family members, drawing on lessons from Turkey’s Home Care Allowance. → Pilot reduced-contribution schemes for caregivers in informal care work under social insurance programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Expand conditional transfers linked to education, nutrition, and health (similar to Bolsa Família and MGN-REGA), integrating care incentives. → Develop a Care Index to evaluate programme effectiveness and inclusion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Institutionalise care-sensitive targeting and budgeting across all major federal and provincial social protection programmes. → Link national databases (BISP, NA-DRA, NSER) to track and support unpaid caregivers through life-cycle-based benefits.

7.3 Linking Social Protection with Care Infrastructure

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Repurpose existing public infrastructure, such as community halls, schools, and health centres, into community care hubs providing daycare, eldercare, and health services. → Launch a pilot programme modelled on Bangladesh’s Phulki Community Crèches, targeting high-density urban areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Scale up childcare and eldercare facilities through public–private partnerships and support from local governments, using the Punjab Day Care Centres Act 2023 as a foundation. → Introduce tax incentives and matching grants for employers who establish workplace care centres. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Create a national network of community-based care centres, prioritising rural and underserved regions. → Integrate care infrastructure into urban and housing development policies, drawing from Colombia’s Bogotá Care Blocks model.

7.4 Strengthening Community-Level and Collective Care Solutions

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Support community-based pilot models for communal kitchens, daycare, and laundry services through BISP women’s groups and local NGOs. → Build on India’s SEWA and UN Women’s ‘Better Skills, Better Care’ models to formalise collective care cooperatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Facilitate community savings and care cooperatives, especially in rural districts, to promote collective ownership and sustainability. → Provide microgrants or revolving funds for community-managed care enterprises. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Integrate community cooperatives into local governance systems, ensuring representation in care planning, monitoring, and service delivery.

7.5 Leveraging Data and Financing for Care-Sensitive Social Protection

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Expand time use and labour force surveys to capture both unpaid and paid care work. → Integrate care-related variables into NSER and other social registries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Adopt ‘Care Budget Tagging’ under Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) to track care expenditures across ministries (drawing from the Philippines’ WEE Care Ordinance). → Pilot blended financing models combining government funds, CSR contributions, and donor support to sustain care initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Institutionalise care-related fiscal reporting within the national Public Finance Management (PFM) system. → Establish a Care and Social Investment Fund to ensure sustainable financing and innovation in care programmes.

7.6 Expanding Coverage to Informal and Domestic Workers

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Begin digital registration of domestic and care workers via NADRA and MoHR platforms. → Launch a national policy dialogue on the ratification of ILO Conventions No. 189 and No. 156. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Pilot portable social protection schemes for informal and domestic workers, offering health insurance, maternity benefits, and pension coverage. → Introduce digital grievance redress mechanisms, drawing from Bangladesh’s HelloTask and Vietnam’s JupViec models. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Fully integrate domestic and care workers into formal labour codes and provincial social protection frameworks. → Promote the formation of collective bargaining associations and worker unions for domestic and home-based workers.

7.7 Building a Skilled and Protected Care Workforce

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Map the care labour market and existing training programmes across TEVTA, NAVTTC, and NGOs. → Design short-term care training courses with a focus on childcare, eldercare, and disability care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Establish national accreditation standards and career pathways for care workers. → Expand social protection coverage for trained care workers through subsidised schemes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Create a National Care Workforce Framework to professionalise the care sector and ensure fair pay, decent work conditions, and career mobility across regions. → Develop public-private Care Academies to generate a pipeline of skilled care workers for domestic and overseas labour markets.

7.8 Promoting Cultural Transformation and Narrative Change

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Launch public awareness campaigns (modelled on UN Women’s ‘Dare to Care’) to challenge gender stereotypes and showcase men as caregivers. → Introduce paternity leave policies and flexible work arrangements in public institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Embed care and gender equality education in school curricula. → Partner with media outlets to sustain narrative change and highlight positive care role models. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Integrate care ethics into civic education, teacher training programmes, and corporate social responsibility frameworks. → Foster intergenerational and inter-household redistribution of care through community and family support initiatives.

7.9 Advancing Intersectional Accountability and Representation

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Ensure the representation of women, informal workers, and minority caregivers in social protection boards and local planning committees. → Integrate disaggregated data systems to track equity outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Institutionalise intersectional monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the effectiveness of care-sensitive programmes. → Provide leadership and advocacy training for women’s groups, organisations of persons with disabilities, and community caregivers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Embed participatory accountability mechanisms in care governance—such as citizen scorecards, public audits—to ensure transparency and responsiveness. → Formalise the inclusion of caregiver voices in national policy dialogues and parliamentary oversight committees, ensuring their perspectives inform decision-making.

7.10 Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) as a Financial and Political Tool

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Issue a policy directive requiring all ministries to identify care-related allocations within existing budgets. → Integrate Gender Budget Tagging (GBT) in pilot federal and provincial departments to systematically track care spending. → Reactivate or establish Gender Mainstreaming Committees in the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety (MoPASS) to oversee GRB adoption. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Expand GRB to provincial and local governments, ensuring care integration across sectors such as education, health, agriculture, IT, and WASH. → Conduct capacity-building workshops for budget officers and policymakers on care-sensitive financial planning and impact assessment. → Publish annual GRB progress reports highlighting allocation for care, implementation gaps, and gender impacts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Institutionalise GRB in the Public Financial Management (PFM) and Medium-Term Budgetary Frameworks (MTBF). → Enact a National GRB Act or Policy, making gender- and care-sensitive budgeting a statutory requirement. → Link GRB indicators to the SDG targets, national scorecards, and fiscal accountability systems to strengthen transparency and policy coherence.

7.11 Building Feminist Coalitions for Implementation

Short-term (0–1 year)	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Long-term (3–5 years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Establish a Feminist Care Coalition comprising civil society organisations, women’s rights groups, trade unions, and grassroots care networks to ensure participatory implementation of care policies. This coalition could act as a bridge between policymakers and communities, facilitating dialogue, monitoring progress, and ensuring that policy design reflects lived realities of beneficiaries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Institutionalise cross-sectoral collaboration among ministries, provincial departments, and regional feminist networks to align national reforms with South and Southeast Asian initiatives on gender-transformative governance. → Enable shared learning, mutual accountability, and harmonised standards for care-inclusive governance by creating horizontal and vertical coalitions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Sustain feminist coalitions through formalised accountability mechanisms that reinforce collective power and track progress towards transformative change. These mechanisms could include annual national forums, policy scorecards, and regional peer review exchanges. → Embed coalitions within governance systems to ensure that the care economy is not treated as a technical reform agenda alone but as a political project grounded in solidarity, accountability, and shared regional momentum.

Conclusion

This paper examined the dynamics of the care economy in Pakistan, which remains constrained by social, economic, political, and governance issues deeply rooted in gendered power relations. Despite the vital role of both paid and unpaid care work in sustaining societies, it continues to be undervalued, feminised, and unsupported. Addressing this issue requires a paradigm shift in how governance understands and responds to care, care work, and the care economy.

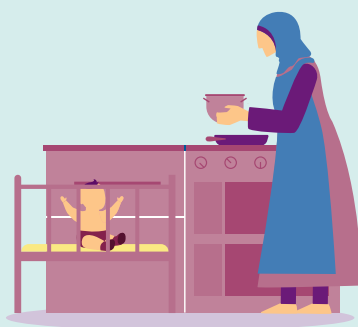
Comparative practices from the Asia-Pacific region and beyond demonstrates that integrating care into governance is both feasible and transformative when backed by political will, institutional reforms, and investment in public services. Pakistan's social protection architecture offers a critical entry point for embedding care infrastructure and services within national systems.

The cost of inaction is high; reforming the care economy must therefore be recognised as central to building a just, resilient, and inclusive society. Institutionalising these reforms is imperative to advance economic and social rights—not merely as a matter of gender equity, but as a prerequisite for sustainable development. To sustain progress, Pakistan must make care a central pillar of its national development and governance agenda. Embedding care within fiscal policy, labour regulation, and social protection will not only advance gender equality, but also strengthen state accountability and collective social responsibility. A gender-transformative governance approach—guided by the 5R framework of recognising, reducing, redistributing, rewarding, and representing care—provides a clear pathway to reframe care as both a shared societal obligation and a driver of inclusive and sustainable growth.

Strategic Levers for Transformative Change towards Care-Inclusive Social Protection



Institutionalise a National Care Policy and Roadmap



Diversify social protection registries beyond the current beneficiary profile



Introduce care-sensitive adjustments such as cash-for-care transfers and pensions for unpaid carers.

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Acknowledgment

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the team at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Pakistan for their invaluable support and cooperation throughout the conceptualisation and development of this policy paper. Our gratitude to **Felix Kolbitz, Resident Representative of FES Pakistan**, for his strategic guidance and institutional support. Similarly, we would like to thank **Sidra Saeed, Program Manager at FES Pakistan**, for her contribution in ensuring the paper is grounded in the current political and socioeconomic realities of the country.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. The foundation is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany.

The Gender Justice Competence Center Asia-Pacific (GJCCAP) coordinates FES' work on gender justice in the Asia and the Pacific region. Together with colleagues, feminists, and partners in the region, we create spaces for exchange and mutual learning, and develop transformative strategies for a more gender-just future.

Advancing Economic and Social Rights in Pakistan through Care-Inclusive Social Protection

Advancing Economic and Social Rights in Pakistan through Care-Inclusive Social Protection argues that the failure to recognize and value the care economy, both paid and unpaid care work, creates barrier in gender-just governance. Focused on the Pakistan context, the analysis calls for a gender-transformative governance approach using the ILO's 5R framework to embed care within social protection systems.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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