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# A Crisis of Care: Building India's Care Economy

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GS1

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## THE LIFT LINE

Every economy runs on a hidden subsidy: the unpaid work of feeding children, nursing the sick and caring for the ageing, done overwhelmingly by women. India's Time Use Survey makes the imbalance stark. Until this care work is recognised, redistributed and rewarded, women's economic potential will stay capped and the coming demographic (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/demographic/>) squeeze of childcare and eldercare will fall on the same tired shoulders.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The care economy links gender, labour, ageing and welfare policy, making it a versatile theme across two GS papers.

**GS Paper 1:** Role of women and women's organisations; population and associated issues; social empowerment; the changing structure of the family; ageing of society.

**GS Paper 2:** Issues relating to development and management of social sectors and services (health, education, human resources); welfare schemes for vulnerable sections and their performance; government policies for the elderly and women.

**Prelims angle:** Time Use Survey 2024, Female Labour Force Participation Rate under PLFS, the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017, the Palna Scheme, the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act 2007, and the ILO 5Rs framework.

**Mains angle:** Analyse how the invisibility of unpaid care work depresses female labour force participation and propose a care-economy policy that treats care as public infrastructure.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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The Time Use Survey 2024 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation) found that women aged 6 and above spent about 289 minutes a day on unpaid domestic work, compared with about 88 minutes for men, a ratio of more than three to one. Women spent about 19.7 per cent of the day on unpaid domestic and care work, versus 2.6 per cent for men.

This unpaid burden coexists with a slowly rising but still low female workforce participation. The Female Labour Force Participation Rate (PLFS 2023-24, age 15 and above) was 41.7 per cent, up from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18, but urban female LFPR remains low at about 28 per cent. Government-referenced estimates value women's unpaid care and domestic work at roughly 15 to 17 per cent of GDP, though estimates range widely across methodologies. The care burden is thus both a gender-justice issue and a macroeconomic one.

## THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

### Care is infrastructure, and its absence taxes women

When there is no affordable creche, no elder-care support and no paternity norm, the “default carer” is a woman, and she either leaves the workforce or never enters it. Care must be seen as economic infrastructure, like roads or power, that enables everyone else to be productive.

### The three fronts of the care crisis

FRONT	KEY POLICY	GAP
Childcare	Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017 (creche in establishments with 50+ employees; leave raised from 12 to 26 weeks); Palna Scheme (Anganwadi ( <a href="https://ujjiyari.com/terms/anganwadi/">https://ujjiyari.com/terms/anganwadi/</a> )-cum-Creches under Mission Shakti)	Weak enforcement, no informal-sector coverage
Eldercare	Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act 2007	No integrated national senior-care policy (NITI Aayog, Feb 2024)
Recognition	ILO 5Rs framework (Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, Represent)	Unpaid work still statistically invisible in headline output

The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 mandates a creche in establishments with 50 or more employees and raised paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks, but enforcement is weak and the informal sector, where most women work, is left out. The Palna Scheme, a restructured National Creche Scheme under Mission Shakti (<https://ujjiyari.com/schemes/mission-shakti/>) (Samarthya), runs Anganwadi-cum-Creches, drawing on the roughly 14 lakh Anganwadi Centres under ICDS and Poshan 2.0.

## The eldercare cliff is approaching fast

The elderly (60 and above) are about 10.5 per cent of the population now, roughly 104 million, and are projected to rise to about 19.5 to 20 per cent, roughly 320 million, by 2050. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 makes maintenance a legal obligation of children, but NITI Aayog (February 2024) flagged the absence of an integrated senior-care policy. There is also a **feminisation of ageing**: women outlive men, so the elderly population skews female, and older women are more often widowed and economically dependent, compounding lifelong care burdens.

### HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use the **ILO 5Rs framework** (from the ILO Resolution on the care economy, June 2024) as your analytical spine:

- **Recognise** unpaid care in national statistics (the Time Use Survey is a start).
- **Reduce** drudgery through basic infrastructure (water, fuel, sanitation) and technology.
- **Redistribute** care between women and men and between families and the state.
- **Reward** paid care workers with decent wages and formal status.
- **Represent** care workers in policymaking and **collective bargaining** (<https://ujjiyari.com/terms/collective-bargaining/>).

Layer on the **investment lens**: the ILO estimates that a public investment of about 2 per cent of GDP in the care economy could create around 11 million jobs in India, roughly 70 per cent of them for women. Care spending is not consumption; it is job-creating investment that simultaneously raises female participation.

### THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture an iceberg. Above the waterline sits the visible, measured economy of paid work and GDP. Below the waterline, far larger, floats the unpaid care economy, cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, nursing elders, held up mostly by women. Now imagine the waterline as the Time Use Survey: for the first time, we can see the size of the submerged mass. The policy task is to lift part of that iceberg above the waterline, recognising it, funding it and sharing its weight, so that women are no longer the invisible ballast keeping everyone else afloat.

### WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Universalise childcare.** Expand the Palna Scheme, enforce the creche **mandate** (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/mandate/>), and extend coverage to informal and gig workers.
- 2 **Draft an integrated national senior-care policy.** Act on NITI Aayog's 2024 recommendation with home-care, geriatric health and financial-security components.

- 3 **Formalise care workers.** ASHA and Anganwadi workers remain “volunteers” rather than formal employees; regularisation with fair wages is overdue. The Union Budget 2026-27 proposed training about 1.5 lakh caregivers, but training without formal status is incomplete.
- 4 **Redistribute care.** Promote paternity and parental leave, flexible work and public awareness to shift care norms.
- 5 **Invest counter-cyclically.** Treat care as infrastructure; even 2 per cent of GDP invested could create millions of predominantly female jobs.

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

The theme connects to UPSC’s sustained interest in women’s work and social security. **UPSC Mains GS1 (2019):** “Women’s movement in India has not addressed the issues of women of lower social strata.’ Substantiate your view.” **UPSC Mains GS2 (2021):** questions on ageing and vulnerable-section welfare. It also links to Prelims coverage of the Maternity Benefit Act and PLFS data.

**Practice question (Mains, 15 marks, 250 words):** “The invisibility of unpaid care work is both a gender-justice failure and a macroeconomic loss. Examine the evidence from India’s Time Use Survey and propose a care-economy strategy using the ILO 5Rs framework.”

Sources: *The Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com>)

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