



# AFRICA-FRIDAY REFLECTIONS

## "AFROCENTRIC THOUGHT"



**WHO CARES ABOUT THE CARERS? IT IS ABOUT TIME WE MOVE THE ECONOMICS OF CARE TO THE FRONT!**

**TIEGO NWOKORO.**

**A dedication to all the care givers in the world.**

Everyone needs care in their lives. Just as well, most people will or have had to provide care for others at some point in their lives. Reproductive work, which is mostly unpaid, is all that is done to nurture, care for and sustain other beings. These are tasks identified with a primary caregiver, usually a mother or an individual who is personally responsible for the general wellbeing of others.

There is no need for statistics to tell us that most of the care work or care giving is done by women and young girls almost everywhere in the world.

The concept of social reproduction, that is, the process that makes it possible for individuals; families; communities and society as a whole to continue to operate, gives us a lens through which to take a look at and talk about this care economy.

## Who cares what it is?

We find care work in both formal and informal settings; market and non-market economies. Some of this care is provided for by the health services sector, most of which is formal and public. Public services for childcare, early childhood development, disability as well as elder care comprise the care economy. We are however, not going to dwell on the public sector much in this piece.

Care work can be paid or unpaid. Paid care work is performed for pay or profit by care workers, as in public servants mentioned above. Domestic workers, who provide both direct and indirect care in households, are also part of the paid care workforce.

Unpaid care work on the other hand, is provided for without any expectation of monetary reward by the person providing it. A sibling or partner can perform direct care like nursing a patient in the household or feeding an incapacitated or fully capable person. The care can also be indirect, like fetching water; cleaning; or when a neighbour can assist with cooking or homework.

We had to wait for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to put a finger on unpaid care work for us to widely consider it as work.

I wonder how long it would take for us to take unpaid care work not only as work, but also as a crucial piece of the entire world of work.

*"Alas, the central role of care is rarely recognised as a key economic driver of value."*

## In the line of fire.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the centrality of reproductive work and household production in the stabilisation of the capitalist or productive economy. Albeit low paid (in terms of money and prestige), it is now more than ever evident that the care economy is important. Care work is the backbone of the pandemic response. However, undervaluing our care workers - health workers; our caregivers; our cleaners, continues without any prospect of change. Alas, the central role of care is rarely recognised as a key economic driver of value.

This paper seeks to ignite our people to think more about the care workers, whether they are paid or unpaid, in our determination to do what we think is right. This is a direct way of weaving it into our moral fibre.

The pandemic pushed many productive and social reproductive activities to the household, and for the most part, the responsibility falls disproportionately on

the female to find a balance. We therefore have to closely interrogate the interface between reproductive (at home for instance) and productive work (at work).

### **A labour of love.**

Caring for our children, parents, partners, relatives or associates at face value does not seem like an economic act. However, the way in which we organise care work can have a major impact on the economy. Care work is viewed as something mostly women do because it is what they are expected to do according to their gender roles, or for either emotional satisfaction, or filling some other void.

It is considered to be a labour of love. Granted, in many homes we have instances where gender roles are disregarded or whichever way you view it; either reversed or reserved. And there are some people who in general enjoy giving selfless service within bounds and without any expectation. In Africa, we still have communities where gender roles are completely loose and some men do naturally engage in some sort of care work.

We value the home as a place of love given freely and not as a place of economic exchange.

Therefore, the care worker does not see his or her job (feel free to read duty, obligation, whatever tickles your fancy) as primarily economic, especially unpaid care work. However, the truth is that these issues are staring us in the face on a daily basis. It is a wonder why they are not talked about more often and openly. The same care worker may have similar constraints as anyone else in terms of her or his time and what she or he can use it for. Care work may also be performed or experienced alongside violence, vulnerability, control, and in some cases coercion.

The expectation is to care for others out of love or devotion rather than for money. Interestingly, even with what is meant to be paid care work, this expectation holds true.

*"The expectation is to care for others out of love or devotion rather than for money"*

### **Is it a trivial issue?**

We have come to not value care work and even trivialise it within the law, hence the labour protections tend to be weak for paid care work. On social media, one reads of women asking other women how much they pay their domestic caregivers. The kind of shocking revelations that come from those exchanges is nothing short of shameful, even when a minimum wage for domestic workers, for example, has been gazetted and set by the government.

Many of these care workers are often immigrant women, or women from rural areas. Either way, they are seeking economic mobility. These women leave their own children and partners behind in order to care for generally other children; the elderly; disabled people or the otherwise incapacitated or unstable in more affluent neighbourhoods.

What has happened is a kind of intergenerational migration of mostly women. Women migrate to do care work and finally return home. Even though that may lift the economic status of the family to the extent that they can pay for education and so forth for their children, it does not actually create mobility for them. So the next generation then is likely to immigrate if the status quo remains.

The entry educational and skill requirements for most domestic paid care work are often quite low, and many workers treat it as temporary work. Because of this, many social scientists tend to describe paid carers work as low skilled. Of course, it does not begin to reflect the fact that looking after other people can be a challenging job which requires a vast set of soft skills, prime among them being interpersonal skills.

Conventionally, the relationship between the care giver and the care receiver does not warrant be viewed as a monetary exchange. In the same breadth, the government should ideally have limited interference in our sacred homes, but unfortunately that is where the care work may or may not be performed under unfavourable conditions. We have a duty to confront these dynamics, lest we exacerbate the feminisation of poverty and vulnerability of women in particular, to violence.

*"We have a duty to confront these dynamics, lest we exacerbate the feminisation of poverty and vulnerability of women in particular, to violence."*

### **Moving forward.**

Because economic opportunity and upward mobility make up the foundation of many dreams, it is evident that women are key partners at the core of making these dreams a reality. Care work is fundamentally important because it is a universal human need. Our society and economy can hardly function without it. Children will not grow to be healthy and happy adults if they are not cared for from the moment they enter into the world. Those in poor health rarely get better or even recover if they are not helped by others. The disabled and old will not be able to contribute to society and live dignified lives without the support and care of others.

Despite this fundamental importance, care work does not receive enough attention within mainstream social sciences and society at large. Consequently, it is undervalued as part of the economy and our interactions.

This system that consists of activities and relationships involved in meeting the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects of care towards others, has to come to the fore at this time of crisis.

*"Let us bring our care givers to the front as we look forward to a future of decent lives for all!"*

We have to give it more prominence in our policies and conversations. Can we finally recognise the value of care work and unpaid care work in particular? Let us bring our care givers to the front as we look forward to a future of decent lives for all!



**Tiego Nwokoro.**